

Congressman Lee Zeldin (NY-1)

“Thank you Mr. Chairman, and Ranking Member as well, for the opportunity to testify today.

“With September marking Suicide Prevention Month, I would like to take this opportunity to testify on behalf of a program that has saved the lives of countless New Yorkers who put their lives on the line to defend the rest of us.

“I have the distinct honor of representing New York’s First Congressional District, located on the east end of Long Island, otherwise known as the greatest Congressional District in America.

“Not only do we have the most beautiful beaches in the country and so much more, but the very communities we all call home played such an instrumental role in the founding of our great nation.

“Today, my home County of Suffolk, boasting one of the highest concentrations of veterans in the country, prides ourselves on our rich history and commitment to serving our nation’s veterans.

“Unfortunately, when our veterans return home from the battlefield too many find that the fight has just begun.

“The Department of Veterans Affairs, as this committee knows well, estimates that approximately 20 veterans a day take their own life, oftentimes they’re plagued with the invisible wounds of war we have come to know as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI).

“One of those servicemen who was suffering was PFC Joseph Dwyer, an Iraq War veteran from Mount Sinai. His picture is behind me. As an Army Combat Medic, PFC Dwyer became the face of the Iraq War in 2003 when a photo of him carrying an injured Iraqi child to safety went viral worldwide.

“Unfortunately, when he came back home to Long Island, he returned with the mental wounds of war, and, after years of struggling, he lost his battle with PTSD in 2008.

“It is important to note that Joe didn’t commit suicide. He was seeking temporary relief from his pain and his last words were, ‘I don’t want to die.’

“Understanding that PFC Dwyer was just one of the many local veterans struggling, I created the PFC Joseph P. Dwyer Veteran Peer Support Program as a NY State Senator in 2012. The Dwyer program is modeled as a peer-to-peer support program for veterans suffering from PTSD and TBI. This model provides a safe, confidential, and educational platform where all veterans are welcome to meet with other veterans in support of each other’s successful transition to post-service life and seeks to build vet-to-vet relationships that enhance positive change. This program also incorporates a variety of therapeutic activities such as horse training and fishing that provide for common experiences, learning and personal growth.

“My home county - Suffolk County - served as one of four test counties in New York, and since then, with the love and hard work of so many exceptional men and women locally, the program has successfully expanded to over 20 counties across New York, saving lives and assisting tens of thousands of New York veterans battling PTSD and TBI. This year, on top of fully funding the program, the New York State budget actually increased funding to this successful program.

“The way the program is organized - providing grants to localities - has allowed each county to customize their individual program to their needs and the resources they have available while running

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an efficient and effective program. Counties only receive \$100,000 - \$300,000 each from New York state and what they do with it is incredible.

“There are a lot of people who come to Congress and they’ll propose a program and the numbers they’ll throw around are seven, eight, nine figures to solve this problem. What we’re finding in our home County of Suffolk and what has now been expanded all across the State of New York, with just \$100,000-\$300,000, we are saving countless lives in our home county and across the state.

“It’s continued track record of success is why I introduced H.R. 1749, the PFC Joseph P. Dwyer Peer Support Program Act to authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to make grants to state and local entities to carry out peer-to-peer mental health programs all across our nation and help ensure all of our nation’s veterans have access to the support they need. I challenge and plead with my colleagues on this great bipartisan committee to accomplish what is now possible: efficiently ensuring that every veteran in America has access to a peer to peer support model that works to save their lives, their families, their jobs, and so much more.

“This bill is cosponsored by 21 of our colleagues, including committee members Kathleen Rice, Chris Pappas, Greg Steube and Elaine Luria. I would encourage you to speak to Congresswoman Rice. One of the counties is her home county of Nassau County where her home county is doing a great job of implementing this program.

“PFC Dwyer is just one of the many veterans who have suffered from PTSD or TBI, and more must be done when they return home.

We must ensure these brave servicemembers have every resource they need to transition back into civilian life and the PFC Joseph Dwyer Peer Support Program is an integral part of our veterans’ success.

“Again, I thank the Chair and Ranking Member for giving me the opportunity to testify today, and I ask you to please consider this legislation.

“I yield back.”