

Rep. Chris Smith (NJ-04)
Addressing the Urgent Need to Boost Therapy, Treatments for Veterans

Thank you, Chairman Takano, for your continued efforts to improve the health programs available to our nation's veterans.

Today, I ask the Committee to favorably report, for floor consideration, HR 2435, the *Accelerating Veterans Recovery Outdoors Act*, legislation I introduced with Representative Adam Smith. HR 2435 will establish and empower an interagency task force to identify barriers veterans face when accessing public lands for recreation and/or therapeutic activities. Within one year, the newly created task force will provide recommendations to Congress on how to eliminate those barriers and open up more public outdoor space for use by our veterans.

Research has increasingly shown that outdoor recreation can be an effective form of treatment, rehabilitation, and healing for veterans. While many nonprofit organizations, veteran service organizations, and private companies have used the outdoors to help heroes heal, providing greater coordination among key federal agencies will open new opportunities for veterans on public lands and other outdoor spaces.

Consider the example of Blake, a combat-wounded veteran who served in Iraq. By the time he was 20, Blake suffered several traumatic experiences pushed him into depression, anxiety and PTSD. Three VA Psychiatric Wards and a substance abuse rehab left him barely clinging to hope, but it was a backpacking trip led by the Sierra Club Military Outdoors that changed his entire perspective of the tragedy that defined him until that point.

Blake began participating in backpacking trips in Yosemite, Ansel Adams, and Big Bend. He says that shared experiences in the outdoors taught him “purpose, self-reliance and the healing powers of nature.” Blake reports that “in every Texas sunrise in the desert or a sunset next to an alpine lake, I found more beauty and serenity than I thought existed. I found camaraderie with my other veterans in sharing our stories on the trail. The darkness of what I had experienced couldn't compare to the light I saw in watching a trout swim in the Merced River with Half Dome looming nearby. And when the depression, anxiety and everything else that comes with PTSD creeps back into my life, I know just what to do...strap on a pack and get outside!”

According to the Department of Veterans Affairs' National Center for PTSD, between 11 and 20 percent of veterans who served in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom and 12 percent of those who served in Desert Storm have PTSD in a given year, and 30 percent of those who served in Vietnam will have had PTSD in their lifetime.

It is important to note that HR 2435 does not require the VA to prescribe recreational therapy, but simply helps expose—and hopefully remove—current barriers so that public lands are more available to veterans for hiking, backpacking, fishing, horseback riding, rafting, and biking, all of which have proven to advance recuperation and healing.

More than 120 veteran service organizations, outdoor recreation groups, and conservation organizations, including the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Paralyzed Veterans of America, Disabled American Veterans, and Minority Veterans of America, have endorsed HR

2435. The bill is also supported by many environmental groups—the Sierra Club, REI Co-op, Audubon Naturalist Society—and has wide bipartisan support in Congress with 121 cosponsors in the House and 23 cosponsors in the Senate.

In the upcoming budget for 2021, we intend to invest \$10.2 billion in mental health services across several federal agencies. And, \$312 million will be targeted through the Department of Veterans Affairs for suicide prevention, PTSD treatments, and mental health care. The *Accelerating Veterans Recovery Outdoor Act* is a cost-free way to supplement these comprehensive medical mental health programs and make use of our Nation's outdoor resources to help more veterans heal.

As the former chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, I have been a long-time supporter of providing veterans with the quality healthcare they deserve, and I believe this bill builds upon holistic medical care and acknowledges the added benefits of outdoor recreation therapy.

I look forward to continuing to work with the Committee to ensure this important legislation passes the House of Representatives.