

Written Statement for the Record of Chairwoman Michelle Steel  
Orange County Board of Supervisors  
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
Hearing on "Comprehensive Veteran Suicide Prevention"  
Thursday, September 10, 2020

---

Thank you, Chairman Takano and Ranking Member Roe, for holding this hearing. The County of Orange, California and I appreciate your leadership on the important issue of veteran suicide prevention. On behalf of the County of Orange, California, I submit this statement for the Congressional Record.

Veteran suicide is a somber and serious issue that deserves significant Congressional action. The need for Congress' attention to this matter is reflected in the tragic fact that approximately 20 veterans die by suicide each day.

One critical tool to help prevent veteran suicide is the improvement and support of county veteran service officers (CVSOs). CVSOs help veterans access a range of federal benefits, including U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health care and service-connected benefits. In Orange County, CVSOs are often the first point of contact in the community for veterans' services and help veterans access the support and treatment they need.

As part of the effort to address the grave matter of veteran suicide and other critical veteran needs through CVSOs, the County supports efforts in the Veterans Comprehensive Prevention, Access to Care, and Treatment (COMPACT) Act of 2020 discussion draft to improve CVSOs and expand community-based outreach that will increase veterans access to services that support overall health and wellness. Specifically, Orange County appreciates Congressman Mike Levin's efforts included in the discussion draft based on H.R. 5516, the Commitment to Veteran Support and Outreach Act. The legislation will authorize \$50 million annually for five years to expand and support CVSOs or similar local entities that currently assist veterans in obtaining benefits.

The Veterans COMPACT Act will help veterans navigate federal assistance and benefits across the country. In Orange County, the Veterans COMPACT Act will directly assist our Veterans Service Officer Resource Enhancement Project by reducing office wait times, allowing for more efficient claim processing times, and quicker access to financial and healthcare benefits. Funding made available from the Veterans COMPACT Act will also allow the County to expand a CVSO employee recruitment and retention plan.

Prior to COVID-19, 17% of the veterans helped by Orange County Veterans Service Office traveled for assistance from outside the County. During the pandemic, the number of veterans who travel to Orange County for assistance has increased and widened the gap between veteran needs and federal resources in the County. To meet the growing needs of veterans and help address delays in CVSO assistance, additional federal resources are needed. Orange County supports the language included in the Veterans COMPACT Act that expands and improves resources for CVSOs.

As Chairwoman of the Orange County Board of Supervisors, and as a mother whose son-in-law is a Lieutenant in the Navy about to deploy, I support the Committee's efforts to address veteran suicide and call on Congress to do what you can to help our servicemen and women who put their lives on the line to protect our nation. Improvement of CVSO resources is an important step towards addressing veteran suicide and access to the essential federal services our veterans have earned through their sacrifice.