

Thank you Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Bost, and every Member of the House Veterans Affairs Committee for inviting me to participate in today's hearing.

I'm privileged to represent the best Congressional District in the country - New York's First Congressional District. Not only do we have the most beautiful beaches in the country and so much more, but the very communities we call home played such an instrumental role in the founding of our great nation.

Our servicemen and women have sacrificed so much in their courageous fight for our exceptional nation and its freedoms, but unfortunately, when our veterans return home from the battlefield, too many find that the fight has just begun.

In my home County of Suffolk, which boasts one of the highest concentrations of veterans in the country, we pride ourselves on our rich history and commitment to serving our nation's veterans.

The Department of Veterans Affairs estimates that approximately 20 veterans a day take their own life, oftentimes 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 suffering was PFC Joseph Dwyer, an Iraq War veteran from Mount Sinai, New York. 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 New York 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.

Suffolk County served as one of four test counties in New York, and since then, with the dedication and hard work of so many exceptional men and women locally, the program has successfully expanded to over 25 counties across New York, saving lives and assisting tens of thousands of New York veterans battling PTSD and TBI. The program

is so incredibly successful that the New York State Budget for FY22 included a 22 percent increase in funding for the 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 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.

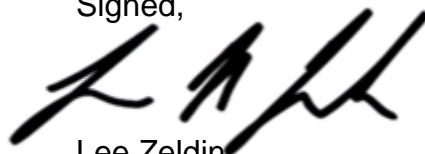
It's continued track record of success is why I introduced H.R. 1476, the PFC Joseph P. Dwyer Peer Support Program Act to authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to make grants to state and local entities to carry out peer-to-peer mental health programs all across our nation and help ensure all of 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 to save their lives, their families, their jobs, and so much more.

This bill is cosponsored by 23 of our colleagues. It has also earned the support of 14 organizations, including the American Legion, Military-Veterans Advocacy, Blinded Veterans Association, Military Order of the Purple Heart, American Ex-Prisoners of War, Paralyzed Veterans of America, Catholic War Veterans, NYC Veterans Alliance, Jewish War Veterans, Fleet Reserve Association, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, Wounded Warrior Project, AMVETS, and American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.

I urge the Committee to immediately consider the long overdue expansion of this successful program through the passage of this commonsense and desperately needed legislation.

Thank you again for inviting Members of this body to submit their testimony. I look forward to working with all of you moving forward to ensure that our veterans receive the care and respect they have rightfully earned.

Signed,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lee Zeldin', written in a cursive style.

Lee Zeldin
Member of Congress