

Congresswoman Angie Craig
House Veterans Affairs' Committee Member Day Testimony
May 26th, 2021

Thank you, Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Bost, and Members of the Committee for having me here today.

I am honored to represent Minnesota's 2nd District, which includes both the southern suburbs of the Twin Cities and rural greater Minnesota. My district is home to over 33,000 Veterans.

Today I would like to speak on a priority I know we all share – the importance of access to mental health services for our nation's Veterans and National Guard Members. I am particularly concerned about those in rural areas and former service members who do not qualify to receive care at the VA.

Tragically, despite years of attention and effort, Minnesota continues to lose around 100 Veterans to completed suicide each year. We know that suicide is often preventable, yet its causes are complex and treatment too often remains inaccessible.

Last month, I hosted a roundtable with local stakeholders to address this very issue. The participants represented a mix of state-based agencies, non-profits, VSOs, and the Minnesota National Guard. These dedicated professionals, many of whom are Veterans themselves, discussed the complex challenges facing those who return from service. An array of challenges – combating stigma, the need for common entry points to care, and ensuring a seamless transition between VA and community care providers – lie before us.

In 2020, Minnesota was selected to participate in the Governor's Challenge, a joint initiative between SAMHSA and the VA to prevent suicide among service members, veterans, and their families. Governor Tim Walz, a retired Guardsman and former Ranking Member of this Committee, directed Minnesota's Department of Veterans Affairs to work with the state's VA health care systems, NAMI Minnesota, Vet Centers, the Minnesota Department of Health and other stakeholders to develop a comprehensive and collaborative plan for reducing deaths by suicide to zero.

The plan focuses on four priority areas – identifying and screening service members and their families who are at risk, forming a culturally competent approach to suicide risk screening, improving the transition process and lethal means safety and safety planning.

The goals of the Governor's challenge are directly supported by the Committee's major suicide prevention bills that passed into law last year. Thanks to the Committee's bipartisan work, the Veterans COMPACT Act and the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care

Improvement Act will help address the gaps in care and intervention experienced by my constituents and Veterans across this nation.

I respectfully request that the Committee exercise oversight over the provisions that address VA staffing and rural Veterans' access to mental health care, as well as the newly established grant program to improve VA collaboration with community organizations already serving Veterans.

Additionally, I would welcome the opportunity to help in this oversight and bring my perspective as a Member of the Energy & Commerce Committee with oversight of SAMHSA and HHS to the table.

I know the Committee is aware of these issues and has worked tirelessly to address them. As Chairman Takano has said: we cannot tolerate any number of Veteran suicides. I am committed to partnering with you in these efforts to ensure our Veterans receive the care they need and deserve.

Thank you, and I yield back the balance of my time.