

Testimony by Congresswoman Ashley Hinson (IA-01)
HVAC Member Day – 05/26/21

Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Bost, Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today during the House Veterans Affairs Committee's Member Day hearing. I appreciate the opportunity to share with you Iowans' priorities when it comes to supporting our veterans.

I know Iowans are well-represented with Dr. Miller-Meeks serving on this committee, but I want to add to that conversation by sharing with you some of the stories I have heard from Iowa's First Congressional District.

Last week, I was honored that two of the bills I helped introduce passed the House with overwhelming bipartisan support. One of these bills targets sexual harassment and assault within the Department of Veterans Affairs, so that VA employees have a safe work environment and can focus on their job of serving our veterans. I am confident that bill will be considered by the Senate soon.

The other bill I was proud to have pass the House last week was the Sgt. Ketchum Rural Veterans Mental Health Act. As you know, Mr. Chairman, this bill was named after a veteran in Iowa who was denied service at a local VA and tragically ended his life shortly after he was turned away. I believe this bill is essential and I

thank the Committee for helping advance this critical legislation – but it’s only the first step.

I am here today to talk to you about veterans’ access to care specifically in rural areas. While all of our veterans deserve and need our support, especially when it comes to their mental health, this support can be particularly difficult to access for veterans in rural communities like the ones I represent.

In rural Iowa, veterans often have to drive long distances, travel to major cities (which can be triggering on its own with their bigger population densities), take time off of work if they have reentered the civilian sector, or wait weeks or months for care. I’m not just listing barriers to access – I’m talking about these barriers being real, troubling challenges for veterans who are suffering from mental health challenges like depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and more. It is hard enough for some veterans to make the decision to seek help – we don’t need to make it any harder for them to actually get the help they seek.

I know this is an issue because one veteran in my district explained to me just how hard it is to make those decisions after combat trauma. And just how hard it is to book an appointment, let alone leave the house and drive several hours to one, to sit in a waiting room surrounded by unfamiliar faces, always on edge. We have to legislate for those veterans – the ones who most need support are the ones who have the hardest time getting it.

Earlier this year, I had the privilege of visiting Retrieving Freedom, a 501(c)3 non-profit in Waverly, Iowa. This organization is dedicated to training service dogs for veterans (they also help kids with autism). Service dogs are trained to meet the specific needs of an intended human partner. The dogs undergo a rigorous training program that lasts over two years and learn how to perform specific chores and tasks, but “they also offer companionship and unconditional love,” according to the organization.

And let me tell you, I saw that companionship and unconditional love with my own eyes when I met Tracer and his human, Sergeant Trent Dirks. Sergeant Dirks served our country honorably in the United States Army, deploying to Afghanistan in 2010 and returning home to after seeing the unimaginable during his tour in northeast Afghanistan.

Upon his return home to Iowa, Sergeant Dirks struggled with an inability to sleep, depression, and PTSD. He watched two friends with whom he was deployed take their own lives. He contemplated it himself. And then, he found Retrieving Freedom, where he was paired with Tracer.

This story of a soldier who needed support and wasn't getting it elsewhere isn't new, unfortunately. What is new is the way Tracer sat with his back up against Trent's legs when he told me this story, ensuring that his owner knew nobody could come up behind him. I met Trent and Tracer after years of their journey together, after Tracer accompanied Trent to a veterans' hospital to get intensive

treatment, giving him the confidence to be in public. According to Trent, Tracer “has helped boost [his] spirits and return[ed] happiness to [his]life again.”

Another important part of this puzzle – Tracer goes home with Trent every night. They live together and care for each other. That means Trent has a constant support system, regardless of how far he lives from the closest VA facility. And it means he can live his life again.

So, I encourage this Committee to think about innovative solutions to the challenges our veterans face, especially in our rural communities. We need to support and encourage nonprofits like Retrieving Freedom to continue their incredible work. I would also like to ask this Committee to work with me in a bipartisan way to support and increase the accessibility of service dogs like Tracer for our veterans.

Thank you, and I welcome any questions from the Committee.