

**TO:** Rashida Tlaib  
**FROM:** Andrew Myslik; Adrienne Salazar  
**DATE:** May 25, 2021  
**RE:** Veterans Affairs Committee Member Day Testimony

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**Witnesses**

- **The Honorable Peter Welch (VT-At Large)**
  - **The Honorable Robert Wittman (VA-1)**
  - **The Honorable Rashida Tlaib (MI-13)**
  - **The Honorable Sheila Jackson Lee (TX-18)**
  - **The Honorable Ashley Hinson (IA-1)**
  - **The Honorable Brian Higgins (NY-26)**
  - **The Honorable Michael Cloud (TX-27)**
  - **The Honorable Grace Meng (NY-6)**
  - **The Honorable French Hill (AR-2)**
  - **The Honorable Derek Kilmer (WA-6)**
  - **The Honorable Fred Keller (PA-12)**
  - **The Honorable Lizzie Fletcher (TX-7)**
  - **The Honorable Brian Fitzpatrick (PA-1)**
  - **The Honorable Michael San Nicolas (Guam-At Large)**
  - **The Honorable Andy Biggs (AZ-5)**
  - **The Honorable Brad Wenstrup (OH-2)**
  - **The Honorable Buddy Carter (GA-1)**
  - **The Honorable Vern Buchanan (FL-16)**
  - **The Honorable Warren Davidson (OH-8)**
  - **The Honorable Gus M. Bilirakis**
  - **The Honorable Peter Meijer (MI-3)**
  - **The Honorable Angie Craig**
  - **The Honorable Kaiiali'i Kahele (HI-2)**
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- Good morning/afternoon.
  
  - Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Bost, and Members of the Committee, I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of our honorable veterans, servicemembers, and their families of Michigan's 13<sup>th</sup> District Strong.
  
  - Ahead of Memorial Day, in which we honor those whose lives were lost while in service to our country, I'd like to use my testimony to shine a light on the pervasive issue of our government not honoring our veterans who are able to make it home, but face unbelievable challenges.

- It has long been customary to say “thank you for your service” when greeting a veteran or service member—but those I represent would like me to tell you: they have long been tired of being thanked with empty words. They want meaningful policy actions.
- When we look at the difficulty in transitioning to civilian life, it is glaringly clear that our government is not taking bold action to ensure that they are able to do so happily and healthily.
- In 2018, about 18 veterans a day took their own lives.<sup>1</sup> The unemployment rate for veterans—especially younger ones and those from recent wars—rose even as the national unemployment fell at the start of this year.<sup>2</sup> And veterans make up 8% of the country’s homeless population—despite making up just 6% of the overall population.<sup>3</sup>
- Words, parades, federal holidays are simply not enough to take care of people who left their families and put a hold on their lives to serve our country.
- Orlandis Lawrence, an Army National Guard veteran I represent, certainly agrees.
- Mr. Lawrence was injured in an accident in the line of duty - but when he applied for disability in 2009, he was denied. Years later, he was finally given a 70% service-connected disability rating for a bilateral shoulder condition acquired in that accident. To this day, he is *still fighting* for a 100 percent disability – in large part because the system is inexcusably slow.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2020/11/12/suicide-rate-among-veterans-up-again-slightly-despite-focus-on-prevention-efforts/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.militarytimes.com/education-transition/2021/02/05/veterans-unemployment-rate-worsened-slightly-to-start-the-new-year/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2021/03/18/the-number-of-veterans-experiencing-homelessness-rose-slightly-even-before-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>

- In June of last year, he filed an appeal, but did not receive a reply from the Veterans Appeal Board until April of this year – 10 months later merely acknowledging that their office failed to issue a determination on his case.
- Mr. Lawrence says he feels left behind—and I’m sure countless other veterans my fellow colleagues represent across the country do, too. Our veterans who were convinced that they would serve the country and the country would ensure they would be taken care are finding out that their promise was the only promise upheld.
- In my district alone, over 20 percent<sup>4</sup> of civilian veterans 18 years and older have a service-connected disability rating. How many of them as we sit here today are stuck waiting and aching just to hear back on their cases like Mr. Lawrence has been?
- You know, it doesn’t matter because even one is too many.
- Those who valiantly served their country should not have to come back and fight their own government for the health care they not only need, but was hard-earned.
- Finally, while hiring at the Department of Veteran Affairs may have jumped 37 percent in the last year, in an attempt to close such wide gaps in communication, the quality of service to our veterans must also be raised.<sup>5</sup>
- These services must also be two-pronged, focusing on both the physical *and* mental ailments that afflict our veterans.
- It is a fact that some of the deepest, most enduring wounds our brave servicemembers will suffer in their years of service and after are mental. These mental health challenges often go unseen to

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<sup>4</sup> [https://censusreporter.org/data/table/?table=B21100&geo\\_ids=50000US2613&primary\\_geo\\_id=50000US2613](https://censusreporter.org/data/table/?table=B21100&geo_ids=50000US2613&primary_geo_id=50000US2613)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=5429>

those around them but could cost them their jobs, homes, and families if left untreated—and they have been for far too long.

- **I am asking you to please support a bipartisan legislation to address the serious shortcomings with the VA Patient advocates.**
- Thank you all again for this opportunity to speak to you today. I look forward to working with you all to see to it that, again, our vets are thanked with meaningful action, not just words, and the stigma around mental health treatment ends.