



The Hon. Mark Takano
Chair
Committee on Veterans Affairs
United States House of Representatives

The Hon. Mike Bost
Ranking Member
Committee on Veterans Affairs
United States House of Representatives

September 22, 2021

Dear Chairman Takano and Ranking Member Bost,

On behalf of the National Association of Counties (NACo), the only organization representing the nation's 3,069 counties, parishes, and boroughs, I write to thank you for holding the important hearing, "Veteran Suicide Prevention: Innovative Research and Expanded Public Health Efforts." While 2019 data from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) shows a moderate decrease in veteran suicide, the disproportionate rate at which our former service members take their own lives remains a critical public health crisis. This tragic epidemic requires a comprehensive prevention strategy encompassing all levels of government and partners in the community. Given the significant role that county governments play in serving our nation's veterans and the promising models we are implementing across the country, I offer the following recommendations for strengthening our combined efforts to promote veteran mental health and prevent veteran suicide:

1) Pass the Commitment to Veteran Support and Outreach (CVSO) Act

In 36 states and two Native American tribes, CVSOs play a key role in helping veterans access a range of service-connected federal benefits, including VA health care, housing and transition assistance programs. However, these officers are currently funded almost entirely by counties, which creates challenges for areas with high demand or counties that serve veterans in rural areas. The CVSO Act would provide new federal resources to county governments to help meet growing caseloads and ensure that all our veterans are accessing the benefits they earned through their military service.

Research suggests that veterans treated at VA are significantly less likely to complete the act of suicide than veterans outside the system. Nearly half of post 9/11 service members utilize VA health services for a myriad of combat-related issues, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), depression, and anxiety. Therefore, the CVSO Act also directs VA to prioritize grants that will serve areas with high rates of veteran suicide, Veteran Crisis Line referrals, or CVSO shortages. Often, CVSOs are often the first point of contact in the community for accessing services and create important connections to the supports and resources that prevent veterans from reaching crisis. Counties support this important legislation and urge Congress to ensure its passage as part of a multi-pronged strategy to reduce veteran suicide.

2) Increase Resources for County Governments to Lead Community-Based Suicide Prevention Efforts

County governments are uniquely equipped to convene community stakeholders to employ evidence-based public health practices to prevent and reduce suicide at the local level. Veterans live in nearly every county across the nation. In 2018, 18 million veterans were living in U.S. counties and represented

10 percent or more of the total adult population in one-third of the nation's counties. Along with our significant investment in veteran services through CVSOs and other local initiatives, counties annually invest \$100 billion in community health systems, including behavioral health services. Through 750 behavioral health authorities and community providers, county governments plan and operate community-based services for persons with mental illnesses and substance abuse conditions. Counties across the nation also operate Veterans Treatment Courts, through which we can connect justice-involved veterans with programs and benefits that can treat underlying mental health and substance abuse conditions.

As you know, since 2018, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has partnered with VA to bring the *Governor's and Mayor's Challenges to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans, and their Families* to states and communities across the nation. Participating sites engage with stakeholders to implement promising, best, and evidence-based practices to prevent and reduce suicide at the local level and receive technical assistance from federal partners.

While county governments are eligible to serve as Mayor's Challenge Teams, we represent only four of the 19 active participants (Montgomery County, Tenn., Hillsborough County, Fla., Mecklenburg County, N.C. and Suffolk County, N.Y.) We encourage SAMHSA and VA to increase outreach and engagement with county officials to ensure that county governments are applying to participate in—and selected for—the SAMHSA Mayor's Challenge alongside our partners in city government.

NACo also applauds the recent authorization of the Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program (SSG Fox SPGP), a three-year community-based grant program that will provide resources to community organizations serving certain Veterans and their families across the country. Under the program, eligible entities may receive up to \$750,000 per fiscal year to provide or coordinate providing suicide prevention services to eligible veterans and their families, including making referrals to VA for individuals deemed at-risk of suicide. County governments are among the entities eligible to apply for SSG Fox SPG funding. We urge VA to prioritize county governments and/or consortia, including county agencies, for these grant awards.

3) Increase Opportunities for County Governments to Support Transitioning Service Members

In the period following separation from the military, service members face the challenge of transitioning to a post-military civilian life, which can exacerbate the risk of suicide. County agencies, CVSOs and community-based organizations can all play an important role in providing resources and support to new veterans entering our communities. However, to better accomplish this task, we require improved information sharing with our federal and state partners to help us identify transitioning service members.

We are eager to work with this Committee and your Senate Counterparts to develop solutions that facilitate increased information sharing between the Department of Defense (DOD), VA, state Departments of Veterans Affairs and CVSOs to facilitate this process. We also encourage increased resources for partnerships, such as the ETS Sponsorship Program, that can work with CVSOs and other county agencies to facilitate access to employment, education, housing, legal advice, service benefits, medical care and mental health resources.

County governments stand ready to work with you to definitively end the crisis of veteran suicide. The [NACo Veterans and Military Services Committee](#) brings together more than 100 county officials

together to develop and highlight county best practices and policies to promote innovative programs, services and benefits for our nation's military, veterans and their families. Please do not hesitate to use as a resource for promising suicide prevention models and feedback on how federal programs and strategies are impacting veterans in our communities. We look forward to our continued partnership with you in this area.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Matthew Chase". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent loop at the beginning of the word "Matthew".

Matthew Chase,
Executive Director