

- Thank you Mr. Chairman for the opportunity to come before this committee to talk about an issue that impacts my district, my constituents, and the country as a whole.
- I first want to take the opportunity to say that I am forever grateful for all that our service women and men have done for our country.
- When these individuals complete their service, there are certain things that they should not have to worry about – two of which are critical when transitioning back to society—Healthcare and Housing.
- I know the Department of Veterans Affairs works hard to provide our service men and women the help they deserve. As the Representative for Texas' 30th Congressional District, I represent the Dallas VA Medical Center – an institution that not only treats Dallas veterans, but veterans across Texas and veterans living in the surrounding states.
- The care they provide is second to none, and I am proud of the work they are doing at this facility to help our veterans.
- As we all know too well, veterans come back with the scars of war. Some of these scars, of course, are invisible, but they nevertheless demand the same level of medical attention that any physical injury would require.
- Unfortunately, about a quarter of our Veteran population today reside in rural areas.
- In addition to the inconvenience of driving longer distances to access medical care compared to the rest of their veteran counterparts, rural facilities treating veterans may not have the complete set of resources or care that other more urban settings may provide.
- This is particularly true when it comes to mental health services. While the VA has provided telehealth services for veterans prior to the pandemic, it appears that the availability of mental health resources via telehealth vary by location and provider.
- Given that veterans are almost twice as likely to die by suicide than non-veterans, we must make sure that they have access to this service. This is especially important for our homeless veterans, who are at even higher risk.
- Despite all the difficulties in accurately counting how many persons live without permanent shelter, we are fortunate to have a rough underestimate thanks to the thousands of volunteers who have gone out on a single night to perform a Point in Time Count every other year.
- According to the Point in Time Count in 2022, over thirty-three thousand veterans are homeless in this country.

- When you are homeless, you don't have reliable access the internet. But even if you have the technology like a smartphone, you don't have reliable electricity to charge it, or adequate means to protect it from the conditions like rain and snow. This means they can't get access to the telehealth services they need.
- These are men and women who put their lives on the line to protect the American way of life.
- I say men and women, but let's be honest – these are kids.
- Fresh out of high school, these kids sign up to serve their country, and all too many bear a high price.
- I personally believe that all people ought to have a right to permanent shelter.
- However, I think everyone can agree that if anyone is deserves a place to call home, it is our returning veterans.
- And yet, at least 33,000 veterans are homeless.
- Not only is this an unfathomable indignity we are allowing them to endure, but it puts their lives at risk.
- It should come as no surprise that when you don't know where you're going to lay your head at night, when you don't know when or where you'll have your next shower or next meal, it is harder to get a job. It is easier to fall into the criminal justice system. It is harder to reintegrate back into every day society and get your life back on track.
- If you remember nothing else today, what I want everyone in this committee room to know – what I want every American to know—is the physical and mental toll that the lack of permanent housing has our veterans.
- Homeless veterans were almost twice as likely to die than housed veterans.
- This committee has got to do more.
- In the cities experiencing acute lack of housing, where so many of our homeless vets live, we do not have to sit idly by.

- Many of these cities have a VA Clinic in them under our jurisdiction.
- Over the last few years, many individual clinics have gone above and beyond and have shown the difference that a concerted effort to house every veteran can make.
- As an easy start, we could have VA staff work as service coordinators and advocates for veterans to take advantage of existing resources. This, of course, means ensuring the VA has sufficient discretionary funding to achieve these goals.
- Or we could fully lean in and have the VA building housing for veterans with wraparound services to secure employment, treat addiction, and more
- The point is, we have to do something.
- This nation owes a debt to our returning soldiers.
- This committee is responsible for every veteran struggling with mental health and the lack of permanent housing.
- I look forward to working with my colleagues to ensure that all veterans have the access to care they need and the comfort of a place called home. It is the very least we must do.