

Testimony for the Committee on Veterans Affairs

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for giving those like myself who are not members of the VA Committee the opportunity to discuss our priority issues with you in this forum. Veterans' care transcends district and party lines. All of us want to ensure the best care for those that risk their lives to defend our freedoms.

I have only been a Member of Congress for a few months, but a disturbing trend that has been all too apparent is the number of veterans in crisis in my district that are unable to secure timely mental health care from the VA. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 17 veterans tragically take their own lives each day. Our community in northern Indiana has unfortunately borne witness to this too many times.

In early May, during a veteran town hall, mental health was the most-discussed issue. Veterans portrayed a bleak picture of VA mental health care plagued by long appointment wait times, staffing shortages, and overall disorganization. These failures have a real impact on veterans. In the wake of this jarring town hall, I sent an inquiry to the VA Northern Indiana Health Care System (VANIHC) inquiring about their mental health appointment wait times, staffing, and other information.

VANIHC delivered a prompt reply, to their credit, but it was disturbing. The system has a total of 18 mental health-related vacancies, which is far too many to adequately address the need in the local veteran community. We need more oversight of this problem to understand why such shortfalls exist and where they exist.

I want to share the story of one of my constituents, Sergeant Ted Grubbs, whose personal experience illustrates the VA's failures. Ted served honorably in the Indiana Army National Guard as a part of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2008 and 2009. After returning from duty, he was diagnosed with service-connected complex PTSD and complex TBI.

On April 22 of this year, Ted experienced a severe mental health crisis. He was sitting on his couch and decided to put a pistol in his mouth. Thankfully, Ted put the pistol down but only after realizing it was the day before his daughter's birthday. Ted did the right thing and reached out for help from a medic he served with.

After this incident, everyone, including the VA, acknowledged that he required in-person appointments only. However, a VA therapist said that the soonest they could get him an in-person appointment was June 26th – over two months later. They could only offer telehealth appointments until then.

Since he could not go to the VA for an in-person appointment, he got outside help with a specialist, who told him that she has three qualified friends that have applied for positions at the understaffed VA, but they have received no responses to their applications.

Ted feels that the VA failed him, and I agree. He told my staff that if it were up to the VA, he would not be with us today.

To add insult to injury, the VA said that since they offered telehealth appointments, they will not be reimbursing Ted for his outside care.

Two of Ted's sons are active-duty Marines, and his two other children, a daughter and a son, are Navy veterans. Ted and his family represent the best of America, and we owe it to him and his children to fix VA mental health care. Brave men and women, like Ted, have given so much of themselves up for their

fellow Americans. The absolute least we can do for them as a nation is make sure that they get the help they need in a timely manner.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.