



**Statement for the Record - Get Justice-Involved Veterans Behavioral Assistance and Care for Key Health Outcomes to Maintain Empowerment (BACK HOME) Act**

United States House of Representatives Committee on Veterans' Affairs

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By

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

With Honor Action appreciates the opportunity to submit this Statement for the Record. We thank the Committee for its leadership and commitment to strengthening mental health services for the most vulnerable veteran populations.

With Honor Action is a bipartisan, nonprofit organization that works to strengthen democracy and fight polarization in Congress through principled veteran leadership. Our work includes endorsing legislative solutions to our nation's most pressing issues, connecting military veteran Members of Congress across the aisle to forge bipartisan bonds, and building coalitions of like-minded organizations to demonstrate constituent support for commonsense policies.

We work with the 38 members of the For Country Caucus in the House of Representatives, all of whom are military veterans, and who have taken our pledge to serve with integrity, civility, and courage. We also work closely with 11 Senate allies to reach bicameral consensus. These Congressional leaders leverage their military experience and leadership to build support for and pass legislation in national security, national service, and veterans' affairs.

**With Honor Action supports H.R. 8044, the Get Justice-Involved Veterans Behavioral Assistance and Care for Key Health Outcomes to Maintain Empowerment (BACK HOME) Act**

It is no secret that mental health services are a critical component of veterans' health care. Nearly one in five service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, or around roughly 300,000 people, have symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS), or major depression, and approximately 19% have been diagnosed with a possible traumatic brain injury (TBI).<sup>1</sup> The symptoms of these conditions — difficulty controlling impulses, heightened aggression, an inability to feel safe — can lead to behavior that results in arrest, often for the very people who were trained and ordered to respond that way in combat. In fact, veterans experiencing PTS are 61% more likely to become involved in the criminal justice system than veterans without it, and those with a TBI are 59% more likely to face criminal justice involvement than veterans without one.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tanielian, T., & Jaycox, L. H. (Eds.). (2008). *Invisible Wounds of War: Psychological and Cognitive Injuries, Their Consequences, and Services to Assist Recovery*. RAND Corporation. Retrieved from <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG720.html>

<sup>2</sup> Council on Criminal Justice. (2024, November 19). *From Service to Sentencing: Unraveling Risk Factors for Criminal Justice Involvement Among U.S. Veterans*. Retrieved from <https://counciloncj.org/from-service-to-sentencing-unraveling-risk-factors-for-criminal-justice-involvement-among-u-s-veterans/>



Unfortunately, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is prohibited from treating veterans who are patients or inmates at institutions of other government agencies with a duty to provide care or services, such as prisons. The *Get Justice-Involved Veterans BACK HOME Act*, introduced by For Country Caucus Vice Chair Rep. Herb Conaway and caucus member Rep. Morgan Luttrell, would set up a pilot program in five locations that allows the VA to provide mental health services to incarcerated veterans, with a priority for those experiencing service-connected disabilities related to PTS, TBI, or Military Sexual Trauma. This crucial bill would also encourage prisons, where feasible, to establish dedicated veteran housing units more conducive to effective rehabilitation programs.

The *Get Justice-Involved Veterans BACK HOME Act* addresses gaps in care for an incredibly vulnerable subset of veterans. It is estimated that one in three of the nation's 19 million veterans report having been arrested and booked in their lifetime, and more than 181,000 are behind bars.<sup>3</sup> And, veterans also have an incredibly high recidivism rate. One national inmate survey shows that 62% of veterans in jails report four or more prior arrests, and 68% of veterans in prison report at least one prior episode of incarceration.<sup>4</sup>

Ensuring incarcerated veterans have access to mental health resources that are specifically tailored to service-connected issues can help reduce the rate of recidivism among veterans, allowing them to enter back into civilian life and reduce the risk of being incarcerated again.

With Honor Action is proud to endorse this bill, and now we urge the Committee to ensure sustained support for justice-involved veterans and provide pathways for them to get the mental health care that they need to heal and re-enter civilian life. We thank the Committee for holding today's hearing and for its consideration of this vital legislation.

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<sup>3</sup> Council on Criminal Justice, Veterans Justice Commission. (2023). *Honoring Service, Advancing Safety: Supporting Veterans from Arrest Through Sentencing*. Chaired by former U.S. Secretary of Defense and U.S. Senator Chuck Hagel. Retrieved from <https://vjc.counciloncj.org/vjc-reports/arrest-through-sentencing>

<sup>4</sup> Blonigen, D. M., Shaffer, P. M., Smith, J. S., Cucciare, M. A., Timko, C., Smelson, D., Blue-Howells, J., Clark, S., & Rosenthal, J. (2021). Recidivism Treatment for Justice-Involved Veterans: Evaluating Adoption and Sustainment of Moral Reconciliation Therapy in the US Veterans Health Administration. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, 48(6), 992–1005. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-021-01113-x>. Retrieved from <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7847225/>