

## **Congresswoman Tammy Duckworth (IL-08), Written Testimony in support of H.R. 5059, Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act**

Chairman Miller, Ranking Member Michaud, thank you for your leadership and dedicated service to our nation's Veterans. I appreciate this opportunity to offer testimony in support of H.R. 5059, the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act, which I was proud to help introduce with Chairman Jeff Miller and Representative Tim Walz.

The bill, named after 28-year-old Marine Veteran Clay Hunt, who tragically took his own life in March 2011, will provide accountability for the mental healthcare and suicide prevention programs that serve our nation's service men and women and Veterans.

After four years of distinguished service in the Marine Corps, including earning a Purple Heart for injuries sustained in Iraq, Clay Hunt had significant problems accessing the mental health care he knew he needed. After Clay's service he sought medical care from the VA and filed for disability related to Post Traumatic Stress. Clay's mom testified before this Committee that while working through this process Clay met multiple challenges, including inability to schedule timely appointments for care, his files being lost by the VA, and once he was finally able to secure an appointment, only receiving prescription medication rather than comprehensive care. Clay's appeal for his disability claim was approved 18 months after the request was filed and five weeks after his death.

Navigating VA health care and benefits systems can be daunting for anyone, let alone those who have urgent mental health needs. Clay's story highlights the barriers to care Veterans face, but unfortunately it is not unique. It is a heartbreaking reality that twenty-two Veterans take their own lives each day. Adding to this tragedy is the fact that five of these twenty-two Veterans have been in the care of VA prior to taking their own lives. These are all casualties of war. As a nation, we are failing these brave men and women.

Currently, there are over 2 million Post 9/11 Veterans across the country, and this number will only increase as our military force structure continues to draw down. As the nature of war changes, the injuries our warriors sustain also change. Increasingly, theirs are invisible wounds, which do not have simple treatment and do not always manifest immediately.

Just as these Veterans remained faithful to our country on the battlefield, it is our turn as their Representatives to remain faithful to them and it is our responsibility as a nation to, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, "care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan."

This responsibility includes ensuring that when our service men and women make the brave decision to seek help, they get the quality assistance and treatment they deserve in a timely manner.

I was proud to work with Chairman Miller and Representative Tim Walz on H.R. 5059, the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act in an effort to reduce the barriers that prevent our Veterans from receiving quality health care.

This legislation will task an independent, third party to annually review both the Department of Defense and VA mental health care and suicide prevention programs to find out what's working and what's not. It will also make recommendations on how to improve care. The bill also requires VA to create a one-stop, interactive website to serve as a centralized source of information for all mental health services for Veterans. This bill not only seeks to review and modify current VA practices, but also provides the tools to help meet increasing demands and focus on future care through provisions that address the shortage of mental health care professionals. Finally, through a pilot program established by this bill, Veterans will receive reintegration assistance directly from the communities in which they live, fostering a smoother and more inclusive transition to life after the uniform.

Post 9/11 Veterans step out of their combat boots and into their work shoes searching for meaningful employment, access to healthcare, and engagement in their communities. As a nation, we have a commitment to ensure that they receive the care that they need when they need it.

Thank you again for the opportunity to offer my testimony. I urge all of the Members of this Committee to support this legislation so that we can begin to turn the tide against suicide.