

Statement of the Honorable Gus M. Bilirakis
House Committee on Veterans Affairs
Subcommittee on Health Legislative Hearing

April 23, 2015

Chairman Benishek, Ranking Member Brownley, and members of the Health Subcommittee,

Thank you for holding this very important hearing and for the opportunity to discuss my bill, H.R. 271, the Creating Options for Veterans' Expedited Recovery (COVER) Act.

With statistics showing that one in five Veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan have been diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress, we must responsibly ask ourselves – are we doing enough when it comes to addressing mental health in our Veteran population?

Recent data has shown that every day in this country – an estimated 18-22 Veterans take their own lives. This statistic answers the question I posed earlier. It is obvious more needs to be done. That is why I reintroduced the COVER Act in the 114th Congress.

The COVER Act will establish a commission to examine the Department of Veterans Affairs current evidence-based therapy treatment model for treating mental illnesses among veterans. Additionally, it will analyze the potential benefits of incorporating complementary alternative treatments available within our communities.

The duties of the commission designated under the COVER Act include conducting a patient-centered survey within each Veterans Integrated Service Network. The survey will examine several different factors related to the preferences and experiences of Veterans with regard to their interactions with the Department of Veterans Affairs. Instead of presuming to know what is best for Veterans, we should simply ask them and work with them on finding the right solutions that best fits their unique needs.

The scope of the survey will include: the experience of a Veteran when seeking medical assistance with the Department of Veterans' Affairs; the experience of Veterans with non-VA medical facilities and health professionals for treating mental health illnesses; the preferences of a Veteran on available treatments for mental health and which they believe to be most effective; the prevalence of prescribing prescription drugs within the VA as remedies for treating mental health illnesses; and outreach efforts by the VA Secretary on available benefits and treatments.

Additionally, the commission will be tasked with examining the available research on complementary alternative treatments for mental health and identify what benefits could be attained with the inclusion of such treatments for our Veterans seeking care at the VA. Some of these alternative therapies include, among others: accelerated resolution therapy, music therapy, yoga, acupuncture therapy, meditation, outdoor sports therapy, and training and care for service dogs.

Finally, the commission will study the potential increase in health claims for mental health issues for Veterans returning from the most recent theatres of war. We must ensure that the VA is prepared with the necessary resources and infrastructure to handle the increase in those utilizing their earned benefits to address the mental and physical ailments incurred from military service.

Once the Commission has successfully completed their duties, a final report will be issued and made available outlining its recommendations and findings based on their analysis of the patient-centered survey, alternative treatments and evidence-based therapies. The Commission will also be responsible for creating a plan to implement those findings in a feasible, timely, and cost effective manner.

Last Congress, I was very pleased this subcommittee considered the COVER Act in a legislative hearing. At this hearing, all the Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) and organizations testifying had supported the COVER Act. I want thank you all again for your support through your testimonies given today.

In closing, we have the support from Veterans and the organizations that work closely with them. And it is clear that there is a need to do more in how we – as a nation addresses these challenges. The responsibility is ours. The question now is – what do we intend to do about it. With that, I urge all my colleagues to show your support for our nation’s heroes by signing onto H.R. 271. Let’s get this done for our Veterans and let’s work together on finally getting them “covered.”