

**House Veterans Affairs Committee Subcommittee on Health Legislative Hearing
Statement of the Honorable Gus M. Bilirakis on the “PROMISE Act”**

November 17, 2015

Chairman Benishek, Ranking Member Brownley and distinguished Members of the Health Subcommittee,

Thank you for holding this legislative hearing today. Today’s hearing includes many important pieces of legislation that will improve the services and care our Veterans receive for their dedicated service to our great nation.

Among the bills under consideration in today’s hearing, is my bill the Promoting Responsible Opioid Management and Incorporating Scientific Expertise Act or the “Jason Simcakoski PROMISE Act.” I appreciate the Chairman’s leadership in bringing this important issue before the Committee and for allowing me to speak today on the PROMISE Act.

The tragic death of Marine Corp. Veteran Jason Simcakoski in the Tomah, Wisconsin VA Medical Facility prompted the need for Congressional action. On August 2015, nearly one year from Jason’s death, the Office of Inspector General released their report titled: “*Unexpected Death of a Patient During Treatment with Multiple Medications.*”

The IG report concluded that Jason’s cause of death was due to mixed drug toxicity with the potential for respiratory depression and the combination of various medications was the plausible mechanism of action for a fatal outcome. Furthermore, the IG also found deficiencies in the “informed consent” process, confusion among staff when initiating cardiopulmonary resuscitation, and the absence of certain medications available in emergency situations to reverse effects of possible drug overdose. I request unanimous consent to submit this IG report for the record in today’s hearing materials.

As the guidelines used by the VA and DOD for opioid management have not been updated since 2010, it is due time to ensure those treating our Veterans have the necessary resources and training to effectively treat Veterans with chronic pain. I want to be clear; the intent of this bill is to improve patient safety, not to restrict access for those who truly need these prescriptions for their wellness plan.

The PROMISE Act will increase safety for opioid therapy and pain management by requiring the VA and DOD to update their Clinical Practice Guidelines for Management of Opioid Therapy for Chronic Pain, VA opioid prescribers to have enhanced pain management and safe opioid prescribing education and training, and the VA to increase information sharing with state licensing boards.

This bill also promotes needed transparency within the VA and will further our efforts to hold the VA accountable by requiring GAO to report on recommendations for improvement and assess the level of care Veterans are receiving.

Additionally, the PROMISE Act will authorize a program on integration of complementary and integrative health within the VA and encourage more outreach and awareness of the Patient Advocacy Program to educate Veterans on their care options.

Our Veterans have sacrificed so much for our country, and we have a responsibility to ensure they are receiving the quality of care they have earned and deserve. We must hold the VA accountable and encourage quality care for all Veterans who have fought for the freedoms we enjoy on a daily basis.

I want to thank all the VSOs for their support and for appearing today to provide their testimony in today's legislative hearing. I also want to thank all my colleagues on this Committee and in the House for your support in signing on as an original cosponsor prior to this hearing. With this strong list of bipartisan support, we send a clear message to the Simcakoski family, our Veterans and those that have been affected by such tragedies that we are dedicated in ensuring similar failures will never happen again.

In closing, I am grateful we are here discussing these important bills. I look forward to having a substantive discussion on how we can improve the lives of our true American heroes. In upholding our sacred vow and promise to our Veterans, I urge my colleagues to support this bill and cosponsor the PROMISE Act.

Thank you Mr. Chairman and I yield back.