

**STATEMENT OF
THE HONORABLE MIKE COFFMAN (CO-06)
BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

March 29, 2017

Mr. Chairman, I would like to begin by thanking you for including my bill in today's legislative hearing. To our witnesses, thank you for your testimony, and for ensuring Congress and the American public better understand the challenges facing our Veterans today.

As a Marine Combat Veteran, I like to live by the rule that we never leave anyone behind, and the Veteran Urgent Access to Mental Healthcare Act makes sure that we do not forget those who bravely served our country in their time of need.

Here is what we know for a fact – an average of 20 veterans take their lives daily. Likewise, VA evidence suggests a decrease in suicide risk among those who have received VA healthcare services. And since 2009, the Army has separated approximately 22,000 combat veterans diagnosed with mental health disabilities or TBI for alleged misconduct -- leaving them without access to VA's critical mental healthcare services.

While the correlation between their illness and minor misconduct could be linked, this made no difference to their character of discharge. Historically, a veteran with an other than honorable discharge has been able to seek VA care for a service-connected disability. However, due to the way these veterans were discharged and this failure to connect the dots between an other than honorable discharge and mental health services, this precedence has failed to recognize this problem.

My bill will stay with tradition and correct this disconnect by authorizing urgent mental healthcare to these veterans. And to note, it would not limit VA's existing authority, should the VA choose to provide services beyond what is covered in my legislation.

My bill also calls for a third-party study to review the effect of combat service on veteran suicide rates, as well as the rate and method of suicide among veterans who have received healthcare from the VA and those who have not.

Before the rate of veteran suicides increases anymore, we have to make sure that these service members get the critical mental healthcare they need and that the nation has a better understanding of why veterans think that taking their own lives is the only way out to end their pain and suffering. This is something that we need to get to the bottom of, as quickly and as accurately as possible. My legislation will do just that.

Over the years, Congress has been looking into inefficiency's and mission disconnect at the VA and I believe this has been a key disconnect at the VA. It is time to right this wrong and permanently authorize the Secretary to provide initial mental health assessments and urgent mental healthcare services to veterans at risk of suicide or harming others, regardless of their discharge status.

When someone puts on the uniform, they take an oath to defend our freedoms. We in turn promise to make sure they receive the care and services they need upon returning from their mission.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for allowing me to testify today on behalf of my legislation I look forward to continue working with the committee, as well as our nation's VSOs, to make sure the men and women in uniform are never left behind.