

Testimony of Rep. Ron DeSantis
House Veterans' Affairs Committee Subcommittee on Health
September 26, 2017

Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Brownley, thank you for the opportunity to testify this morning. I request that my statement be accepted for the record.

Addressing service-connected disabilities is a critical part of the United States' commitment to the men and women who risk their lives through military service. Honoring our commitment includes safeguarding mental health, yet far too often combat wounds that go beyond the physical go ignored.

According to the most recent Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) analysis of veteran suicide, "Suicide Among Veterans and Other Americans," an average of 20 veterans died by suicide each day.

The VA must be more effective in its treatment of our soldiers who struggle with mental health disorders, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTS), to reduce the veteran suicide rate.

For this reason, I reintroduced HR 2327, the Puppies Assisting Wounded Servicemembers (PAWS) Act, to direct the Secretary of the VA to carry out a 5-year pilot program to provide grants to select organizations that pair veterans suffering from severe PTS with the service dogs critical to their recovery.

In order to be eligible for a VA grant for a service dog pairing, the organization must either be an Assistance Dog International accredited organization that also meets specific criteria listed in the measure, or meet the Association of Service Dog Providers for Military Veterans Service Dog Agency Standards, which cater to the needs of veterans with PTS.

To be eligible for participation in the pilot, the veteran must have completed traditional therapies for PTS and remain symptomatic. A VA medical provider or clinical team must determine that the veteran is an appropriate candidate for the program, and the veteran shall see the VA medical provider at least every 6 months to remain eligible.

The pilot is capped at \$10,000,000 for the 5-year period covering 2018-2023 and entirely offset with funds from the VA Office of Human Resources and Administration, which has demonstrated inappropriate conference planning and spending in the past.

Prior to reintroduction, my staff and I worked with House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Committee staff, as well as U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs personnel who would be involved with implementing the pilot once it launches and U.S. Government Accountability Office employees who would evaluate its success, to improve language from last Congress. We appreciate the Committee's willingness to work with us to revise language and the support from outside organizations to help move this measure.

An ongoing study conducted by a Purdue University research team revealed in February 2017 that service dogs contribute significantly to emotional and psychosocial well-being. Furthermore, on March 7, 2017, Veterans Affairs Secretary David Shulkin testified at a House hearing on the use of service dogs for veterans who have PTS or other emotional disorders, stating, “[I] think it’s common sense that service dogs help...we hear it every day from veterans...I’m not willing to wait because there are people out there today suffering.”

I am not willing to wait either. The urgency of veteran suicide rates demands that we immediately explore the option of pairing service dogs with veterans suffering from mental health disorders.

I look forward to continuing to work with the Committee to accomplish this goal.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I welcome your questions.