



**WOUNDED WARRIOR PROJECT
STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**LEGISLATIVE HEARING
ON**

**H.R. 234, *Korean American VALOR Act*; H.R. 344, *Women Veterans TRUST Act*;
H.R. 958, *Protecting Moms Who Served Act*; H.R. 1448, *PAWS for Veterans Therapy Act*;
H.R. 1510, *Veterans' Camera Reporting Act*; H.R. 2093, *Veterans and Family Information
Act*; *DOULA for VA Act*; *Sgt. Ketchum Rural Veterans Mental Health Act of 2021*;
and a draft bill to clarify the role of doctors of podiatric medicine in the
Department of Veterans Affairs.**

APRIL 15, 2021

Chairwoman Brownley, Ranking Member Bergman, and distinguished members of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Subcommittee on Health – thank you for inviting Wounded Warrior Project (WWP) to submit this written statement. We are grateful for the opportunity to highlight WWP's positions on key issues and legislation before the Subcommittee.

Wounded Warrior Project was founded to connect, serve, and empower our nation's wounded, ill, and injured veterans, Service members, and their families and caregivers. We are fulfilling this mission by providing more than 20 life-changing programs and services to 185,000 registered post-9/11 warriors and their families, continually engaging with those we serve, and capturing an informed assessment of the challenges this community faces. We are pleased to share that perspective for this hearing on pending legislation. Over the next several months, we are hopeful that we can assist your work to improve the lives of veterans and their families during the 117th Congress.

H.R. 234, the *Korean American VALOR Act*

The *Korean American Vietnam Allies Long Overdue for Relief Act*, otherwise known as the *Korean American VALOR Act*, would amend 38 U.S.C. § 109 to grant certain members of the armed forces of the Republic of Korea entitlement to hospital and domiciliary care and medical services through the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

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While we are grateful to all allied forces who have fought and continue to fight alongside the U.S. Armed Forces, VA healthcare has traditionally been an earned benefit for former U.S. Service members, their caregivers, and certain eligible dependents. Access to this healthcare after leaving the military has been an integral part of ensuring that veterans receive the care, support, and recognition earned in service to the country.

Wounded Warrior Project thanks Chairman Mark Takano (D-CA-41) for his continued leadership on behalf of veterans; however, without first consulting and hearing the voices of the veteran community we serve, WWP cannot provide a position on this piece of legislation.

H.R. 344, the *Women Veterans Transitional Residence Utilizing Support and Treatment Act*, or the *TRUST Act*

Substance use disorders remain a prevalent issue among veterans. WWP's 2020 *Annual Warrior Survey* explored warriors' usage of alcohol and drugs, finding that more than one in four (27 percent) of those who have consumed alcohol or drugs in the past year show a likelihood of having a current substance use disorder. Alcohol consumption, in particular, is a commonly-reported high-risk behavior among women veterans. Among WWP survey respondents who reported drinking alcohol, 43 percent of women screened positive for risky drinking behavior, or consuming so much alcohol that a person is at risk of medical or social problems. Like many other mental health conditions, substance use issues are significant in their ability to impact all aspects of a veteran's physical, mental, social, and financial health. For some, long-term or residential treatment is an absolutely vital service.

The Department of Veterans Affairs currently offers treatment options for substance use disorders through several programs and services, both clinical and non-clinical in nature. However, few operate exclusively for women. The *Women Veterans TRUST Act* would require a nation-wide analysis of VA's treatment and rehabilitation options for women veterans struggling with drug and alcohol dependencies, followed by implementation of a women-specific pilot program designed to fill gaps identified by the study.

Wounded Warrior Project supports the *Women Veterans TRUST Act* and thanks Chairwoman Julia Brownley (D-CA-26) for her leadership on this issue. This bill will provide a clearer understanding of how VA's substance use treatment programs are meeting the needs of women veterans, identify gaps in care and access standards, and establish new pathways to care designed specifically to serve women veterans.

H.R. 958, the *Protecting Moms Who Served Act*

For women veterans who choose to become mothers, maternity care is a basic and essential health care service. As such, VA's Maternity Care Coordination program offers the

important benefits of integrating a woman veteran's maternity needs into her VA health care plan, easing the referral and billing process with community providers, and connecting new mothers to appropriate post-partum care. These services contribute not only to an improved patient experience, but to healthier infants and higher utilization of support services.¹ Demand for Maternity Care Coordination has significantly increased over the last decade and will likely continue to do so as the population of women veterans grows.² VA must be prepared to serve this increasingly diverse population of veterans during every stage of their life, including on their journeys to motherhood.

The *Protecting Moms Who Served Act* aims to improve maternity care through three primary mechanisms: (1) codifying the Maternity Care Coordination program, (2) authorizing \$15 million to support the program, and (3) requiring a Government Accountability Office report detailing maternal mortality and severe morbidity among women veterans, including recommendations for legislative, administrative, and educational initiatives to improve health outcomes for pre- and post-natal care.

Wounded Warrior Project supports the *Protecting Moms Who Served Act*. The resources and data that this bill calls for will help to identify gaps in care, accessibility challenges, and potential disparities among women veterans of diverse backgrounds during a significant moment in their lives. WWP thanks Representative Lauren Underwood (D-IL-14) for her leadership on this important issue, along with all the members of this Committee who have cosponsored this legislation.

H.R. 1448, the *PAWS for Veterans Therapy Act*

Wounded Warrior Project's 2020 *Annual Warrior Survey* found that 83 percent of warriors self-report suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).³ PTSD symptoms include experiencing upsetting memories, having trouble sleeping, and not being able to participate in normal daily activities, such as going to work or spending time with family. Service dogs are capable of performing critical duties to relieve these symptoms, such as providing nightmare and anxiety interruption, turning on light switches, standing next to their handler to provide personal space in crowds, and entering a space first to ensure that no threats are present.

According to revised regulations implementing the *Americans with Disabilities Act* (ADA), published by the Department of Justice on September 15, 2010, a service animal is "any dog that is individually trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of an individual with a

¹ Cordasco, Kristina M., et al. "Care Coordination for Pregnant Veterans: VA's Maternity Care Coordinator Telephone Care Program." *Translational Behavioral Medicine*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2018, pp. 419–28. Crossref, doi:10.1093/tbm/ibx081.

² DEP'T OF VET. AFFAIRS, "Women Veterans and Pregnancy Complications Information Brief," available at https://www.va.gov/HEALTH/EQUITY/docs/Veterans_Maternal_Mortality_Fact_Sheet.pdf.

³ The 2020 *Annual Warrior Survey* is available for download and review at <https://www.woundedwarriorproject.org/mission/annual-warrior-survey>.

disability, including a physical, sensory, psychiatric, intellectual, or other mental disability.”⁴ ADA’s definition includes the provision of service dogs for those with psychiatric and neurological disabilities, including PTSD, to help avert or halt certain behaviors. However, VA will only provide benefits for a service dog if the veteran has been diagnosed with a visual, hearing, or substantial mobility impairment; veterans with PTSD do not meet the requirements.⁵

Wounded Warrior Project believes that service dogs, when properly trained and cared for, have the capability to empower warriors with PTSD to participate more freely in daily activities by mitigating symptoms. In addition to the benefits that a service dog provides, work therapy to train and socialize dogs can also have a powerful impact. WWP has witnessed the positive effects from this type of work therapy through our partnership with Warrior Canine Connection’s Mission Based Trauma Recovery (MBTR) program; training service dogs helps warriors to improve concentration, reduce irritability, and encourage social reintegration.

Over the past decade, VA has been conducting a congressionally-mandated study to evaluate whether service dogs can reduce disability and improve the quality of life for veterans with PTSD. In January 2021, VA released the first part of this report, which found that veterans paired with service dogs experienced fewer PTSD symptoms over time and had fewer suicidal ideations and behaviors, particularly at 18 months.⁶ While these findings are consistent with voluminous anecdotal evidence from veterans who have improved their mental health and wellbeing with the help of a service dog, it is important to note that participants in the VA study continued to receive evidence-based clinical care during the course of the study and many results stated in the report were strictly comparing results of the experience of using an emotional support dog versus a service dog. Nevertheless, the *PAWS for Veterans Therapy Act* would provide valuable services in line with improvements noted in the VA study. The legislation directs the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to carry out a pilot program on dog training therapy and to amend 38 U.S.C. § 1714 in an effort to allow VA to provide service dogs to veterans with mental illnesses who do not also have mobility impairments.

Wounded Warrior Project supports the *PAWS for Veterans Therapy Act*, though we emphasize the importance of ensuring that service dogs are defined in compliance with ADA’s standards or the American Service Dog Access Coalition’s Service Dog Pass standards. While we believe that VA’s requirements for a service dog should be broadened to include veterans with mental health conditions, VA’s criteria must not be extended to include emotional support animals. Lastly, we believe that any effort to expand VA’s ability to provide service dogs to veterans with mental health conditions should be accompanied by careful consideration of how those changes will impact demand for service dogs and how quickly they can be obtained by those who may benefit the most from their support. WWP thanks Representative Steve Stivers

⁴ Judicial Administration, 28 CFR § 36.104 (2010).

⁵ Pensions, Bonuses, and Veterans’ Relief, 38 CFR § 17.148 (2014).

⁶ Richerson, Joan T., et al. “A Randomized Trial of Differential Effectiveness of Service Dog Pairing Versus Emotional Support Dog Pairing to Improve Quality of Life for Veterans with PTSD,” OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT, U.S. DEP’T OF VET. AFFAIRS (January 5, 2021).

(R-OH-15) for his efforts and we look forward to continue working together on this important mental health topic.

H.R. 1510, the *Veterans' Camera Reporting Act*

In 2019, a U.S. House Committee on Veterans' Affairs staffer was assaulted at the Washington, DC VA Medical Center. Unfortunately, this assault was not recorded as the camera facing the incident location was broken. Additionally, two years ago, a series of troubling reports revealed several suspicious deaths at the Louis A. Johnson VA Medical Center in Clarksburg, West Virginia. Again, complications surfaced when lack of security footage delayed identifying the individual responsible for these suspicious deaths. Ultimately, a VA employee from that facility pleaded guilty to multiple counts of second-degree murder; however, if there were proper security cameras in place at the time, there is the chance that additional deaths could have been prevented.

This *Veterans' Camera Reporting Act*, or *VCR Act*, would require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to submit to Congress a report on the use of video cameras for patient safety and law enforcement at medical centers. While the policy dictating the use and limitations around cameras at VA facilities is outlined in VHA directive 1078(1)⁷, we have noticed accounts where these policies were not correctly implemented. The report generated by the *VCR Act* would include information on how security cameras are maintained, how cameras are used to monitor staff and patients, where cameras are positioned in facilities to increase patient safety, and how law enforcement is using this information. This report will help VA and Congress identify if additional policies are needed to increase patient safety and security at VA facilities.

Wounded Warrior Project believes that the safety and security of our nation's veterans needs to be paramount to build trust between the veteran community and VA medical facilities. Stories such as the ones outlined above only compound distrust between the community and VA when information of the incident is lacking because of broken or missing security cameras. WWP supports the *VCR Act*, looks forward to reading the VA report it would generate, and thanks Representative David McKinley (R-WV-01) for his work on this issue.

H.R. 2093, the *Veterans and Family Information Act*

Ever more rapidly, the makeup of our nation's Armed Forces is diversifying. VA projects that over the next 25 years, while the proportion of White veterans will decrease significantly, the populations of Black, Hispanic, Asian, American Indian or Alaska Native, and multi-racial veterans will increase.⁸ WWP is witnessing similar trends among the warriors we

⁷ DEP'T OF VET. AFFAIRS, VHA PUBLICATIONS, available at <https://www.va.gov/vhapublications/publications.cfm?pub=1>.

⁸ DEP'T OF VET. AFFAIRS, OFFICE OF HEALTH EQUITY, Racial and Ethnic Minority Veterans, available at https://www.va.gov/HEALTHEQUITY/Race_Ethnicity.asp.

serve. Today, veterans who are racial minorities constitute 36 percent of the warriors WWP serves, an 11-point increase over the last decade. VA must be prepared to adapt in order to meet the needs of a diverse veteran community, ensuring that all who have served are able to easily access the benefits and care they have earned.

The *Veterans and Family Information Act* would require VA to make its fact sheets available in each of the ten most commonly spoken languages in the United States, including Spanish and Tagalog. The bill also ensures that these fact sheets are accessible on a single webpage, allowing easier access to information published by the Veterans Benefits Administration, Veterans Health Administration, and the National Cemetery Administration.

Wounded Warrior Project believes that family members of veterans from diverse backgrounds should have the tools and materials available in a format that best meets their needs to assist veterans as they navigate the VA landscape. WWP supports the intent of the *Veterans and Family Information Act* and we thank Representative Hakeem Jeffries (D-NY-08) for his efforts to address this issue, but we are not in the position to say whether these are the only language needs or whether a single webpage is the right solution as materials are typically located within individual webpages corresponding to VA-specific services.

H.R. _____, the *Delivering Optimally Urgent Labor Access for VA Act*, or the *DOULA for VA Act*

While the experience is unique for each woman, pregnancy undoubtedly brings about changes in physical, emotional, and mental health for all who choose to become mothers. This consideration is particularly important for women veterans who show high rates of mental health conditions like anxiety, depression, and PTSD.⁹ Studies have shown that PTSD symptoms are predictors of adverse pregnancy outcomes like preterm births, postpartum depression, and the perception of a difficult pregnancy.¹⁰ In dealing with these and other pregnancy-related issues, some turn to doulas for additional assistance.

The role of a doula is to provide continuous physical and emotional support to women during pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period. Usage of doulas has been associated with better pregnancy and birthing outcomes, an effect which is largely attributed to findings that the uninterrupted “emotional, physical, and informational support doulas give to women during the birthing process [account] for the reduced need for clinical procedures during labor and birth, fewer birth complications, and more satisfying experiences during labor, birth, and postpartum.”¹¹

⁹ The 2020 *Annual Warrior Survey* found that 86 percent of women veterans report anxiety, 83 percent report depression, and 80 percent report PTSD.

¹⁰ Nillni, Yael I., et al. “The Impact of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Moral Injury on Women Veterans’ Perinatal Outcomes Following Separation From Military Service.” *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2020, pp. 248–56. Crossref, doi:10.1002/jts.22509.

¹¹ Gruber, Kenneth J., et al. “Impact of Doulas on Healthy Birth Outcomes.” *The Journal of Perinatal Education*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2013, pp. 49–58. Crossref, doi:10.1891/1058-1243.22.1.49.

While doula services are not currently covered uniformly across federal insurers like Medicaid and TRICARE, benefits for these services are becoming more common. States including Minnesota, Oregon, Indiana, New Jersey, and Wisconsin, and Nebraska all cover doula services in some respect through state Medicaid programs. In addition, TRICARE is undertaking a pilot program to offer access to doulas, as directed by Section 746 of the *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021* (P.L. 116-283).

Wounded Warrior Project supports the *DOULA for VA Act*, a bill to pilot the expansion VA's Whole Health program to measure the impact of doula support services on birth and mental health outcomes of pregnant veterans. In our own programming, WWP utilizes a total wellness framework, providing support to veterans in all aspects of their lives through by integrating both clinical and non-clinical services. We understand that effective care and support can come from many sources and seek to maximize each. In a similar fashion, we believe that integrating doulas into a holistic health care team may help women veterans to maintain their physical, emotional, and mental health during pregnancy. WWP thanks Representative Brenda Lawrence (D-MI-14) for her work on this important matter concerning the health of women veterans.

H.R. _____, *Sgt. Ketchum Rural Veterans Mental Health Act of 2021*

There are 4.7 million rural veterans in the United States. Although more rural veterans (58 percent) are enrolled in VA health care, compared to urban veterans (37 percent),¹² many within the rural veteran population face barriers to accessing mental health care. According to WWP's 2020 *Annual Warrior Survey*, 32 percent of rural warriors lack VA mental health resources in their geographic area, compared to 20 percent of warriors in urban locations. This disparity was even more pronounced for women warriors, as 42 percent of women in rural areas reported a lack of mental health resources, compared to 20 percent living in urban areas.¹³

The Department of Veterans Affairs currently offers its Rural Access Network for Growth Enhancement (RANGE) Program in 81 locations. This program provides intensive community-based, clinical case management and psychotherapy services for rural veterans with severe mental health issues. The *Sgt. Ketchum Rural Veterans Mental Health Act of 2021* would establish three new RANGE program centers to serve rural veterans who do not have access to this intensive outpatient mental health care in their vicinity.

Wounded Warrior Project supports the *Sgt. Ketchum Rural Veterans Mental Health Act of 2021* and thanks Representative Cindy Axne (D-IA-03) for prioritizing this topic. This legislation would not only provide rural veterans in three locations with increased access to

¹² DEP'T OF VET. AFFAIRS, OFFICE OF RURAL HEALTH, available at <https://www.ruralhealth.va.gov/aboutus/ruralvets.asp>.

¹³ The 2020 *Annual Warrior Survey* is available for download and review at <https://www.woundedwarriorproject.org/mission/annual-warrior-survey>.

intensive outpatient mental health care, but the accompanying Government Accountability Office study would also provide a better understanding of the demand by rural veterans for intensive outpatient mental health care, whether VA currently has the capacity to meet this demand, and how best to expand and furnish additional resources.

H.R. ____, a draft bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to clarify the role of doctors of podiatric medicine in the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.

Section 502 of the *VA MISSION Act of 2018* (P.L. 115-182) improved pay and leadership opportunities for VA podiatrists to remedy inequalities between lower-extremity specialists and other specialty care physicians, provide equity with the private sector, and address VA's podiatrist shortage. While the *VA MISSION Act* elevated VA podiatrists to the level of other medical doctors, VA's Office of the Under Secretary for Health still only includes a Director of Podiatric Service, a position on par with the Director of Pharmacy Service and Director of Dietetic Service.

Representative Brad Wenstrup's (R-OH-02) legislation would address this issue by requiring that the Office of the Under Secretary for Health replace the role of Director of Podiatric Service with a Podiatric Medical Director. Anyone who fills this position must be a qualified podiatric medicine doctor and must be paid in the same category as physicians and dentists. WWP supports this legislation to clarify the role of podiatric doctors and thanks Representative Wenstrup for his work on this matter.

CONCLUSION

Wounded Warrior Project thanks the Subcommittee on Health and its distinguished members for inviting our organization to submit this statement. We are grateful for and inspired by this Committee's proven dedication to our shared purpose to honor and empower our nation's warriors. Your efforts to provide interventions to meet the growing needs of women veterans and support quality mental health care will certainly have a strong impact on the post-9/11 generation. We are proud of all of the work that has been done and look forward to continuing to partner on these issues and any others that may arise.