

Statement for the Record from Congresswoman Susie Lee (NV-03)

For the

U.S. House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Subcommittee on Health

Legislative Hearing, June 22, 2022

Chairwoman Brownley, Ranking Member Bergman, and Members of the Committee, thank you for holding today's important legislative hearing on my bill, H.R. 6273, the VA Zero Suicide Demonstration Project Act of 2021.

As the House Veterans' Affairs Committee (HVAC) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) are all too aware, suicides have devastated our veteran families and communities for far too long. Over the past two decades, the average number of veteran suicides per day has increased by almost 5% up to 17.2 in 2019.¹ For veterans who have served since September 11, 2001, the rate is even more troubling, with 30,117 active-duty service members and veterans dying by suicide—over four times the number of combat deaths over the past two decades.² The current rate of veteran suicides has surged in recent years, with post-9/11 war veterans' rates exceeding civilian rates after being much lower historically.³ Veterans in 2019 died from suicide at a rate 52.3% higher than non-veterans in the U.S., with those aged 18 to 34 dying at the highest rate.⁴

While these statistics are alarming and demand action, hearing from veterans directly demonstrates the true toll of these deaths of despair on families and communities. Last week a veteran visited my office and reported losing three close friends to suicide over the past year, including a co-worker at his Veterans Service Organization (VSO) just weeks ago. He described many veterans' mental health struggles worsening dramatically since the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban last August. His colleagues from different parts of the country echoed his experience of losing friends they served alongside at an alarming rate. These are the sorts of troubling accounts my colleagues and I have heard from our constituents and VSOs for far too long, without seeing enough progress to stop this devastating loss of life.

The veteran who visited last week emphasized the ways in which VA suicide prevention services continue to fall short in turning back the tide of suicides. In Congress, we have been working hard alongside VA's many impressive public servants and health officials to resolve longstanding issues, like excessive wait times for routine mental health appointments, inadequate telehealth options, and too limited outreach to the most vulnerable veterans. I was heartened to hear an update this spring from VA officials on the implementation of my Leave No Veteran Behind Act, which was passed into law in December 2020. This law has required VA to reach out to veterans who have not been in contact with VA for two or more years, making strides to ensure that every veteran is aware of and has access to the VA medical services they have earned—especially mental health services.

While I welcome this progress in VA veteran care and suicide prevention efforts, it's still not enough. One veteran suicide is too many, and my constituents' concerns about our country's inadequate progress to date in combating veteran suicide are borne out by recent VA data—specifically by the fact that of the 17 veteran suicides per day in 2019, 40% were among *active* VA patients. These are veterans already in the VA system, and these statistics are inexcusable. While much must be done to reach the veterans currently not accessing VA resources, we also must do everything we can to eliminate deaths by suicide within VA.⁵

It is with this goal in mind that last December I introduced the VA Zero Suicide Demonstration Project Act with my colleagues Representatives Tony Gonzales (R-TX), Anthony Gonzalez (R-OH), and Colin Allred (D-TX). This bipartisan bill will roll out a pilot program across the VA to prevent veteran suicide. It will implement proven best practices from the Zero Suicide model developed by the Henry Ford Health Care System in Michigan, beginning with a pilot program to demonstrate the model's applicability to the VA system. The VA Secretary will coordinate with experts and VSOs to select five VA medical centers to receive Zero Suicide training and support.

Since its inception in 2001, the Zero Suicide model has delivered clear decreases in suicide rates. Henry Ford Behavioral Health pioneered “zero suicides” as a goal and developed an innovative care pathway to monitor and modify suicide risk for those suffering with depression. This groundbreaking system-wide approach resulted in a statistically relevant decrease in suicide rates within the Henry Ford health system, including an 18-month period from 2009 to 2010 without a single suicide.

The benefit of the Zero Suicide model is that it takes a whole-of-entity approach to address culture and to identify barriers to improving access and care. While we know that all VA personnel believe that one veteran suicide is too many, there exist systemic issues that prevent VA from taking all the steps necessary to put that belief into practice. The Zero Suicide model has a proven track record in breaking down silos and ensuring that all elements of a care network are operating in tandem to prevent even one suicide.

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) already manages a grant program to advance the Zero Suicide model in private medical centers across the country, which have also shown positive results. It is only right that we also provide our veterans' healthcare systems the benefits of a proven suicide prevention model we are using to stem our country's broader suicide epidemic.

The VA Zero Suicide Demonstration Project Act has solid bipartisan support, with cosponsors from both parties on the House Veterans' Affairs Committee. This bill does not authorize new spending, and it has been endorsed by eleven national organizations, including Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Legion, Student Veterans of America, National Alliance on Mental Illness, and American Psychiatric Association—some of whom have submitted letters of support for this hearing's public record. The strong support from lawmakers from both parties and from respected veterans' and mental health groups makes

this bill a natural choice to advance through the 117th Congress, in order to take swift, effective action to end veteran suicide.

I look forward to working with the committee, VA, and my colleagues across Congress to ensure that our veterans have access to the best mental health care and suicide prevention that our country has to offer. By passing the VA Zero Suicide Demonstration Project Act, we can provide our veterans the multi-layered, evidence-based care they need to end the scourge of suicide ripping apart our families and communities. This cannot wait another minute.

Again, my thanks to committee leadership for the consideration of this important bill today and for your efforts to stop veteran suicide as this Congress continues. I appreciate your commitment to delivering on our promise to take care of those who sacrificed so much for the security of our country. I am eager to continue to work alongside you to secure meaningful progress for our veterans and suicide prevention efforts in the days to come.

¹ <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2021/2021-National-Veteran-Suicide-Prevention-Annual-Report-FINAL-9-8-21.pdf>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/22/us/911-suicide-rate-veterans.html>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/22/us/911-suicide-rate-veterans.html>

⁴ <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2021/2021-National-Veteran-Suicide-Prevention-Annual-Report-FINAL-9-8-21.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2021/2021-National-Veteran-Suicide-Prevention-Annual-Report-FINAL-9-8-21.pdf>