

**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 21, 2023**

Chair Miller-Meeks, Ranking Member Brownley, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to share my strong support for passage of a bipartisan bill I introduced earlier this year, H.R. 1639, the VA Zero Suicide Demonstration Project Act of 2023.

As members of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs, you are far too familiar with the fact that suicide is a serious, devastating issue in the United States, especially for our veterans and their families.

The suicide rate for veterans is one and a half times higher than that of the general population, with an average of 17 veterans dying by suicide each day. Many veterans in southern Nevada have told me they think the number is even higher. Of those 17 veterans a day, 40% of them are actively seen at the VA, which means we lose approximately seven veterans a day to suicide who receive VA care. These numbers are simply unacceptable.

Given the unique stressors and risk factors we know veterans face, Congress needs to do more to ensure those who served our country are effectively, consistently supported through their worst moments.

We need to do more to advance suicide prevention efforts among veterans across our communities—keeping in mind the truth that even one suicide is too many. We need to change our mindset and do everything in our power to bring the number of veteran suicides to zero.

That's why I reintroduced the VA Zero Suicide Demonstration Project Act in March 2023, alongside my colleague, Representative Tony Gonzales. Building on VA's existing suicide prevention efforts, this bipartisan, bicameral bill would stand up a Zero Suicide Initiative pilot program at the VA.

Developed in Michigan's Henry Ford Health Care System, this program is rooted in the belief that all suicides are preventable through proper care, patient safety, and system-wide planning. This model trains and empowers clinicians to assess for suicide risks at every encounter with patients, identifying risk factors as well as interventions, self-management tools, and other effective suicide prevention techniques.

This Zero Suicide approach has delivered statistically significant results across diverse health system, including a notable 18-month period without a single suicide. We owe it to veterans to ensure they have access to this proven approach to suicide prevention.

This bill will ensure veterans have the care and support they deserve, by implementing a pilot program across five VA medical centers and offering them Zero Suicide Initiative training and

support. It's all about changing mindsets and rearranging priorities with a commitment to getting to zero suicides a day.

The bill does not authorize any new spending, and it has been endorsed by many leading VSOs and national mental health organizations—some of which have submitted letters of support for this hearing

Last Congress, this bill saw robust bipartisan support through a successful legislative hearing and passage by voice vote through this committee. While the bill did not come up for vote before the full House during the 117th, I am glad to return to the committee and to urge my colleagues to do all we can to see it through this Congress. Thank you for the committee's attention to and support for this critical piece of legislation. I look forward to working with you all to pass the VA Zero Suicide Demonstration Project Act into law, and to take a critical step in preventing veteran suicide.