

House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Health – Legislative Hearing
March 21, 2024
STATEMENT of Rep. Matt Cartwright (PA-08)

Thank you, Chairwoman Miller-Meeks, Ranking Member Brownley, and members of the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Health, for allowing me to submit a statement in support of critical legislation that would benefit our nation's Veterans. I write today in support of my bipartisan bill, H.R. 5247, the Expedited Hiring for VA Trained Psychiatrists Act, which would increase access to mental health services for our Veterans—to whom we owe a great debt.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) psychiatrists diagnose mental, emotional, and behavioral conditions, and provide treatment to our nation's heroes after they've answered the call to uniformed service. Everyone knows the sobering statistic that the rate of suicide among veterans is almost 60% higher than that of civilians. Whether a Veteran is struggling with the aftereffects of military combat, adjusting to civilian life, or facing a mental illness such as PTSD, having access to a psychiatrist at a VA facility could make a world of difference in a Veteran's journey to mental health and well-being.

While the VA has prioritized hiring new medical staff at an unprecedented rate, it is still difficult to hire and retain psychiatrists at a level sufficient to meet the needs of our Veterans. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) has previously found that the VA does not have proper staff levels for its suicide prevention teams, and efforts to fill these vacancies have been significantly hampered by a long recruitment and hiring process. Furthermore, the GAO has repeatedly reported that demand for Veterans mental health services will only increase, exacerbating staffing shortages.

The practical impacts of understaffing include excessive wait times, lack of proper follow-up care, and Veterans' inability to schedule appointments in a timely manner. These unnecessary hurdles to accessible, reliable care and treatment can have terrible consequences.

The Expedited Hiring for VA Trained Psychiatrists Act would tackle the VA understaffing problem by codifying the VA Secretary's ability to hire psychiatrists who have completed their residency at a VA facility if a position has gone unfilled for at least thirty-five days.

Many aspiring psychiatrists do at least part of their residency in a VA facility. These trainees gain valuable experience working with Veterans and are already familiar with the issues specific to this community. By giving the Secretary the ability to directly convert psychiatric residents to full employment with the VA – pending satisfactory completion of both the residency and all credentialing requirements – Congress can help make the VA a more attractive place for these residents to begin their careers. By reducing the time it takes to fill critical psychiatrist positions, my bill would reduce the wait times for Veterans seeking to access mental health services.

Ensuring timely access to quality mental health care for all Veterans should be a priority for everyone, regardless of party. The Expedited Hiring for VA Trained Psychiatrists Act is commonsense, bipartisan legislation that would provide a fast track hiring process for qualified psychiatrists who train at VA facilities. I am grateful to my colleagues on both sides of the aisle for their support of this important legislation.

Chairwoman Miller-Meeks, Ranking Member Brownley, and members of the Health Subcommittee, I offer my sincere thanks for your consistent prioritization of the issue of Veteran mental health.