

August 17, 2020

The Honorable Mark Takano, Chairman  
House Veterans' Affairs Committee  
B234 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Phil Roe, Ranking Member  
House Veterans' Affairs Committee  
3460 O'Neill House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Jerry Moran, Chairman  
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee  
418 Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Jon Tester, Ranking Member  
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee  
825A Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Roe, Chairman Moran, and Ranking Member Tester:

On behalf of communities across the Nation organized to serve military service members, veterans, and their family members, we offer our strong support for Senate Bill 785, also known as the "Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019." This legislation is a revolutionary proposal to improve the quality of life of our Nation's veterans while empowering communities (municipalities, counties, states, tribal areas, and regions) to combine their veteran engagement efforts with targeted suicide prevention programs.

Senate Bill 785 is significant in both breadth and depth. Section 201, provides structure and authorization of community grants similar in structure to the highly successful Department of Veterans Affairs "Supportive Services for Veterans and Families" Program, also known as "SSVF." As we know, these grants virtually ended veteran homelessness in many communities, and they also created an environment of community collaboration by integrating government and non-government resources around the crisis of veteran's homelessness. Additionally, Senate Bill 785 contains critical community enablers such a next-level research study into the correlation of opioid use with veteran's death; pilot programs to provide veterans access to complementary and integrative health services through animal therapy, agritherapy, sports, post-traumatic growth, and recreation therapy; directs the Department of Veterans Affairs to bolster their research on mental health biomarker work to increase accuracy of care, to improve the diagnosis and treatment of veterans' mental health conditions and suicidal ideation; and increases the capacity of the Veterans Affairs and Vet Center counselors.

Our organizations strongly support the adoption and rapid implementation of initiatives contained in Senate Bill 785 that enlist communities to end veteran suicide, the way SSVF sought to do the same for veteran homelessness. Through grant-supported coordination programs that bring together community veteran-serving organizations to provide veterans and their families with a multitude of services and supports, including those related to employment, health, housing, benefits, recreation, education, and social connection, linked with proactive outreach and engagement we believe these empowered communities will improve the quality of life for veterans and subsequently drive veteran suicide to virtual zero.

We believe the community model used to coordinate care can vary among grantees based on veteran populations, geography, or cultural boundaries. However, regardless of the model, all grantees must seek to improve the quality of life and hopefulness of veterans and their families by identifying those at greatest risk for suicide and not currently utilizing life services; utilizing an information management system to manage, measure, and track progress; and operating an impactful network of community services.

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We believe the measures of success are not just mental health-focused but must be holistic and result in a set of outcomes across the social determinants of health, in order to achieve the critical outcome of eliminating veteran suicide. These holistic measures should include lower homelessness, improved access to medical and behavioral care, improved education status, reduced unemployment and underemployment, and increased resilience or hopefulness. Additionally, using established research methods, communities should establish their veteran suicide baseline and track their impact throughout the grant.

As leaders of the Nation's largest veteran community collaboratives and direct service providers, our organizations have developed, operated, and replicated veteran community integration programs with more than 70,000 veterans supported by over 1,000 partners in our twenty-six affiliated rural and urban communities representing 18 states, across our Nation. We applaud the Senate for passing Senate Bill 785, also known as the "Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019" and encourage the House of Representatives to follow their lead in passing legislation to end veteran suicide by creating strong, more collaborative communities that focus on the veteran. We thank you for your steadfast leadership in crafting this important bipartisan bill and call on all members of Congress to seize this historic opportunity to improve the lives of veterans, their families, and caregivers by empowering communities to reduce veteran suicide. The men and women who have served, are serving and will serve in the future are counting on Congress' support.

Respectfully,



Jim Lorraine  
President and CEO  
America's Warrior Partnership

Charlie Hall  
President & CEO  
Upstate Warrior Solution  
Greenville, SC

Scott Johnson  
President & Executive Director  
The Warrior Alliance  
Atlanta, GA

Barbara Springer  
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