



Testimony of

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Thank you Chairman Levin, Ranking member Bilirakis, Committee members, and fellow panelists,

I've found myself standing on the edge of a structural hole. I've been granted access into the various nodes of transition, and I see the potential for greatness. Communities across the United States want to see the full potential of returning service members, and these communities are actively trying to solve the unfortunate realities of a poor transition.

Our Service branches have an established Transition model, great information that is useful, but for the Warrior, it can be like a factory line. This is not discrediting the efforts of the Departments of Defense, Veterans Affairs, Labor and Small Business Administration, rather it is the reality of transitioning 200,000 servicemembers a year to locations all across the United States.

Each Warrior is unique, but we also have a shared understanding of community. When I left the military, a medically Retired Green Beret, I was sure I was ready for my next chapter. I didn't retain or get everything I needed, and transition was a grind. What helped me was programs developed by community-based nonprofits and universities. I've witnessed and experienced extraordinary civilian leaders take the time to show and guide Warriors down a path of success post military.

My transition was a community effort. Earning a bachelor's degree from Saint Leo University, being a team member with a group trying to reduce Veteran homelessness around Tampa Bay, attending an entrepreneur certificate program at Stanford University's Graduate School of Business, creating the nonprofit Veterans Alternative and graduating with a Master's Degree from Columbia University all were community efforts. People genuinely cared about my success and, these peers and mentors helped me find Success in Transition.

The grind was in the commas of all of those successes. The language of my civilian counterparts was different. I didn't have a checklist to tell me what was next, I had to find it. Looking out at the Tampa Community, and communities across the nation, I see multiple community-based organizations and universities stream lining transition. It is time to work alongside our VA Healthcare Networks, Regional VA hospitals and state departments of Veterans Affairs in assisting Warriors in their transition from Military Service.

Can you imagine what it would be like for a Warrior to have the power of connection through shared networks. These opportunities need to be created if we plan on solving the multitude of difficulties faced in transition.

I've focused most of my efforts on helping Warriors navigate post traumatic and transitional stress. Veterans Alternative serves primarily combat Veterans and their spouses, and although these men and women have experienced combat deployments, a majority of their difficulties stem from transition. Over the last four years, Veterans Alternative has partnered with Florida to provide Warriors with alternative therapies, and

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fortunately this committee has made accessing networks in collaboration of care possible beyond what we have accomplished so far.

In 2016 the COVER Act was passed, a bill presented by my good friend and Ranking Member Gus Bilirakis. The bill created a commission, and set 18 VA Regional Hospitals as pilot sites for alternative therapies through community-based organizations. It took three years of grinding to get it passed, and it has taken 4 years to get to the point of executing pilot programs, but it is a step. One of the pilot sites is James A. Haley VA Hospital in Tampa, Fl.

Florida has a similar bill, Alternative Treatment Options for Veterans (ATOV), funded through the Florida Department of Veterans Affairs in partnership with the University of South Florida who subcontracts to Veterans Alternative and collectively we work with 17 other nonprofit, community-based organizations providing alternative therapies. Next week, we, Veterans Alternative, University of South Florida, Florida Department of Veterans Affairs, The Honorable Gus Bilirakis' office, will sit down with leadership at James A Haley to discuss connecting networks through collaboration of legislative efforts at both the state and federal level.

I've read through the recently passed Senate bill, Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Healthcare Improvement Act which, in part, presents grants for local groups working to help Veterans. I've also read through H.R. 5649 and H.R. 5516, both with the intended purpose of serving our Veterans in the communities in which they live. This is where we should find innovation, bridges connecting networks for good over the current structural holes we operate around. I encourage you to think through the significance of transitional stress as part of the grant process.

Thank you for your time, I am prepared to answer any questions you might have.

**Attachment:** Success in Transition

