

Statement for the Record
The Subcommittee on Health of the Committee on Energy and Commerce
“High Anxiety and Stress: Legislation To Improve Mental Health During Crisis”
Rep. Ami Bera, M.D.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit a statement for the record and for convening this hearing on legislation that may help Congress tackle the mental health crisis during this pandemic. I sincerely appreciate the Energy and Commerce Committee’s commitment to examining this topic in greater depth. As you know, I introduced the Helping Emergency Responders Overcome (HERO) Act to help address mental health amongst first responders. This topic is more important than ever during the COVID-19 pandemic which is stressing our first responders on a daily basis.

As a doctor and a member of Congress, I’ve sought to strengthen our mental health services. The National Institute of Mental Health reported that while one in every five U.S. adults will deal with mental illness, only half will receive treatment. In this time of crisis, I suspect that number will be even lower. We need to ensure our mental health prevention and treatment programs are the finest in the world. And we need to have difficult conversations about ensuring it remains a priority issue for generations to come.

Mental health issues and post-traumatic stress touch on every population in America. But I want to focus on one population in particular- our nation’s first responders. Every day, our nation’s first responders work in high stress environments that makes it difficult for them to separate their home and work lives. Most Americans understand the physical courage that our firefighters and emergency medical service personnel exercise when responding to daily emergency calls but what they do not see is that mental courage responding to those emergencies take. When they speed to the scene of an incident, firefighters and EMS are rushing into the unknown, uncertain of the dangers that await. For that reason, firefighters and emergency medical response personnel are constantly on alert. It’s not surprising, then, that a recent study found that first responders are more likely to die by suicide than being in line of duty.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, first responders are putting their lives on the line in a whole new way. The simple act of helping someone may cause them to be struck with coronavirus. This means that these our first responders have taken on new stressors when responding to calls to help those exposed or infected with COVID-19. Our firefighters and EMS personnel must now not only maintain their physical health and safety, but they must worry about infecting or exposing their loved ones with coronavirus when they come home. We need to ensure that they have the mental health resources they need.

The HERO Act would ensure our first responders have access to those resources in this stressful time. First, it requires that national data be collected on first responder suicides every year. We don’t know what specific behavioral or demographic risk factors cause some first responders to take their lives. By identifying those risk factors, and then designing interventions, our firefighters and EMS personnel can receive help before it’s too late.

The bill also includes critical prevention and treatment resources for our first responders. It establishes a grant program for firefighters and EMS to be trained as peer counselors so that they can help their brothers and sisters in need, creating a direct line of support within fire stations and EMS departments around the country. It would also direct the HHS Secretary to develop, assemble and distribute best practices on the identification, prevention, and treatment of posttraumatic stress among first responders.

The HERO Act will not eliminate all suicides among first responders but it takes some very important first steps to address post-traumatic stress and mental health within their community. As firefighters and EMS stand on the frontline battling the deadliest infectious disease of our time, we need to support and take care of them.

I'm proud to say that this bill has broad and deep bipartisan support, with nearly a fifth of Congress cosponsoring it. As you examine this issue throughout this hearing and shine a light on the HERO Act, I hope you will consider it for a markup soon.

Mental health is an intimidating challenge. But it is not insurmountable. I thank you for convening this hearing and I look forward to working with you to tackle this important issue. We owe it to our country and our nation's emergency response workers who are answering the call every day.