



Rep. Mimi Walters' House Veterans' Affairs Committee Testimony
May 16, 2017

Thank you Chairman Roe and Ranking Member Walz for the opportunity to provide testimony to the Committee.

One of the greatest privileges we have as public servants is to honor the sacrifices our veterans made defending this Nation. Orange County veterans answered their Nation's call to service. Now, as a grateful country, we must answer the call to serve them. We must never waiver on our promises to these brave men and women. As the daughter of a United States Marine, this issue is deeply personal for me. It is my honor to represent Orange County's heroes and I will continue to ensure their voices are heard.

California has the highest population of veterans in the United States, and Orange County alone is home to over 120,000 veterans. Last month, I was honored to welcome 35 World War II veterans from Southern California to Washington, DC. These American heroes, many of whom are from California's 45th Congressional District, represent the greatness of our Nation.

Homelessness

Homelessness is one of Southern California's most pressing issues, with nearly 5,000 homeless individuals living in Orange County alone. While it is difficult to know how many of the homeless are veterans, the Orange County Veterans Advisory Council (OCVAC) estimates that the population is significant. Regardless of the number, even one homeless veteran is too many.

OCVAC has made ending veteran homelessness a priority by working with groups like the Volunteers of America - Los Angeles, which has offices in Santa Ana, and Working Wardrobes to help veterans in my district transition out of homelessness. Through innovative partnerships between businesses, nonprofits, and government agencies, Orange County is making important gains in this fight. I will continue to support these efforts.

Mental Health/Suicide Prevention

OCVAC is also focused on improving mental health treatment suicide prevention efforts. As the Committee knows, the suicide rate is 22 percent higher among veterans than civilians. In 2014, 662 California veterans committed suicide. These statistics are heartbreaking and unacceptable.

We must do a better job identifying and treating mental illness. I was pleased to see legislation from this committee signed into law this year to ensure all veterans, including those with other-than-honorable discharges, can access VA mental health services. Returning service men and women battling PTSD or military sexual trauma need to know they are not alone in this fight.

Women's Care

My district has a large number of female veterans. Women are the largest growing veteran population, and we must equip the VA with the necessary tools to address their unique needs.

A couple of years ago, I had the opportunity to attend the Orange County Women Veterans Leadership Summit in Irvine. The event allowed women veterans from across Southern California to connect over shared experiences and support each other. Women often feel isolated or invisible within the veteran community, and we should be doing more to honor their service.

I have heard from women veterans in my district who chose not to go to the Long Beach VA Hospital for treatment because it is a male dominated environment. Many, especially those who have experienced military sexual trauma, prefer to see a female doctor for gender-specific services. Recruiting more female medical professionals will provide these veterans with a better selection of providers that can address their specific needs and concerns.

Education

Finally, I am encouraged by the work we've done this Congress to help veterans succeed in the career path of their choosing. The Forever GI Bill, signed into law last year, strengthens and expands veteran education benefits. Now, veterans have more flexibility because their education benefits will not expire and can be used for non-traditional technology courses, like coding classes, which can be essential in today's competitive job market.

I am especially proud of the outstanding job higher education institutions in my district do to support student veterans. In addition to providing academic and psychological services, on-campus Veteran Service Centers foster strong on-campus communities. For example, the Irvine Valley College Veteran Service Center hosts an annual graduation celebration and monthly meet-and-greets for student veterans. These support systems can help veterans reach their academic goals.

Again, I want to thank the Chairman and Ranking Member for holding this important hearing. I look forward to continuing to work with my colleagues to improve services for our veterans.