

Testimony Before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs:  
Member Day

Thank you Chairman Roe and Ranking Member Walz for holding this first-ever Member Day today, and for giving me the opportunity to testify on behalf of veterans' issues in Ohio's 15<sup>th</sup> district. I represent the Chillicothe VA Medical Center in Chillicothe, Ohio, and through my visits with veterans and care providers, have been given unique insight into their needs.

Moving forward, Congress must urge VA to serve as a facilitator for veterans transitioning between military and civilian life. In that vein, I want to highlight three issues for the Committee today.

**Mental Health**

First, we face a devastating mental health crisis in this country – one that has particularly affected our veterans' community. When veterans return home, many struggle with visible, physical wounds. However, the invisible wounds our veterans suffer with are often overlooked. This includes Posttraumatic Stress (PTS), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and depression.

VA has an important role to play in disrupting the tragic link between PTS and TBI, drug abuse, homelessness, and, worst of all, suicide.

For this reason, I have introduced H.R. 2225, the Veterans Dog Training Therapy Act. The Veterans Dog Therapy Training Act would establish a pilot program at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in which the Secretary will contract with local therapeutic dog training organizations, and help veterans seeking treatment to learn the art and science of dog training. This legislation has passed the House in the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress.

**Supportive Housing**

Furthermore, PTS is a significant contributing factor to homelessness among our veterans. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development estimates that 39, 471 veterans are homeless on any given night.

Although VA provides pension or compensation benefits to 40,000 veterans monthly, current VA policies preclude veterans with dishonorable discharges from accessing services like housing assistance.

For this reason, I have introduced H.R. 2222, the Housing Our Military Servicemembers Act. This legislation directs Housing and Urban Development to direct funds towards programs proven to be effective at reducing homeless for former servicemembers of the Armed Forces, and require HUD to study veterans who are ineligible for the HUD-VASH program.

I urge the Members of this Committee to consider ways VA can serve vulnerable populations of veterans, even those with dishonorable discharges, as they have served our country.

### **Veterans' Employment**

Finally, VA serves as an important conduit between veterans and hiring opportunities, through programs such as Feds Hire Vets, which provides veterans with information about opportunities in the federal workforce, or interagency collaborations with DOD's Hiring Heroes program, which provides career advisors and specialized Job Fairs.

As an employer of veterans, VA can still improve. That's why I introduced H.R. 2648, the Veterans Transition Improvement Act.

Currently, the Wounded Warrior Federal Leave Act does not apply to veterans employed in front-line medical positions, such as doctors, nurses, optometrists, dentists, and podiatrists, practicing at the VA. This means they must accrue leave over time to seek treatment for service-connected disabilities. H.R. 2648 would allow these veterans to access their leave right away, in line with their counterparts at other federal agencies.

I urge the Members of this Committee not only to support veterans helping their fellow veterans at the VA, but also to consider how to best help veterans with the transition to the civilian workforce.

To conclude, the Department of Veterans Affairs, such as the VA Medical Center in Chillicothe, Ohio, must continue to play a role as a conduit between military and civilian life. As former servicemembers of the Armed Forces return home and navigate mental health, housing, and employment needs, the VA is an important partner. However, the VA is an imperfect agency. I urge the Members of the Committee to address the issues I have discussed with you today.

I want to thank the Committee again for inviting me to testify today.