

Statement of  
Joe Chenelly  
Executive Director of AMVETS  
Before the House Veterans Affairs Committee  
Regarding a Legislative Hearing:

“Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic  
Violent Extremism”

March 31, 2022

As the most inclusive Congressionally-chartered veterans service organization, representing the interests of 19 million American veterans, AMVETS is honored to share our thoughts and expertise as it relates to the complex and multi-faceted events that led us to the point of having a Congressional hearing that uses the words “veteran” and “violent extremism” in the same sentence.

First and foremost, AMVETS must highlight one critical fact. The vast majority of military veterans are upstanding, law-abiding, non-violent members of our great society. Throughout our nation’s history, American veterans have continued serving and leading long after taking off their military uniforms for the last time. Most of the United States’ presidents were veterans. At one point, three-quarters of the U.S. House of Representatives were veterans.

Our nation’s veterans are businesswomen, star athletes, police, mothers, gay, and latino. We are proudly diverse, inclusive, representative of general society. Coming from all walks of life, we are unique in that we chose to put our nation before ourselves.

Veterans are often cast into another light as somehow different from our civilian counterparts in ways that we are not, as if we deal with trauma or injury differently. As if we are less affected by misinformation or politics. But the reality is that American veterans are human, like everyone else.

No matter who you are, poor mental health can leave anyone vulnerable to those recruiting for extremist causes. This is yet another stark reason our federal government must improve and innovate in the way it keeps its promises to veterans, by fixing VA’s broken mental health care system, providing effective mental health care options, and funding external nonprofits that provide meaningful peer support.

**The Over Representation of Veterans in Politics**

Most accounts of the arrestees on January 6th have veterans as overrepresented in comparison to the total population in our Nation. This is not entirely surprising to us. Since the Revolutionary War, veterans have been overrepresented in politics. Two-thirds of American presidents were

veterans. Roughly 20% of members of Congress (an all-time low) are military veterans, and that's an all-time low percentage. Yet, just 7% of the population are veterans.

This is in no way condoning the despicable actions taken on January 6th. AMVETS took swift action, immediately denouncing the attacks on the U.S. Capitol, and declaring that any member found to have participated in the attack on the Capitol would have their membership revoked. Thankfully, to date, we believe none of our members were involved. AMVETS continues efforts to ensure extremism does not find a home in any of AMVETS' 1,200 posts. And we are developing programs to encourage veterans to become more involved in the processes around which democracy is based.

The attacks on the Capitol directly resulted in the death of Brian Sicknick, an Air Force veteran. An additional four members of the Capitol Hill Police who fought off these rioters have taken their lives, likely a result of the trauma they incurred on this horrendous day in our history.

Veterans have found themselves over-represented in political causes since the founding of our Nation. There is something to be said about one's love for our Nation, and care for the state of the world, when you willfully wear the uniform. Veterans have fought for our independence, wars to end secession, and wars in far-off lands in defense of freedom and human rights. Numerous studies show veterans are more likely to vote, more likely to volunteer, and are more likely to join civic groups and organizations.

The unfortunate reality is that a small number of veterans express their support for efforts or causes in unacceptable ways. However, it is also important to note that external events and political influences play significant roles in the overall political dynamics that our country is experiencing.

### **Our Toxic Political Environment, Gerrymandering, and Money in Politics and Media**

According to *Forbes*, "in the 2019-2020 election cycle, total political advertising spending reached \$8.5 billion across TV, radio, and digital media. This was 30% higher than the \$6.7 billion projected earlier (that) year, and 108% more than spending in 2017-2018, which was a record at that time. We saw 9.3 million TV ads alone in more than 4,300 federal, state, and local elections."

A lack of decorum, a lack of respect, and a lack of integrity are becoming the hallmarks of American Politics. Politics is now framed as both zero-sum and something that is won at the loss of others. Danger comes from the lack of tolerance for diverging viewpoints, and the demonstrated lack of consideration for fellow Americans from a different background, race, geographic location, or varying ideology.

Congress has the power to change the narrative, change how they treat one another, change how they run campaigns, change how they have tolerated and encouraged gerrymandering for short-term gains but long-term societal division.

To think Democrats and Republicans can spend more than \$8 billion in demonizing our fellow citizens, and that such actions may not have possibly deadly repercussions is ridiculous and irresponsible.

### **Veterans Present More of a Solution than a Problem**

Civil War veterans created one of the first political advocacy groups in our Nation. The Grand Army of the Republic was founded in 1856 and consisted of veterans of the Union Army, Union Navy, and the Marines who served in that conflict. These men organized hundreds of posts across the nation. It was a model that became the blueprint for today's traditional veteran service organizations such as AMVETS, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Disabled American Veterans, and the American Legion, amongst others.

They supported voting rights for black veterans, promoted patriotic education, advocated to make Memorial Day a national holiday, lobbied the United States Congress to establish regular veterans' pensions, and supported Republican political candidates. The GAR Memorial still stands here in our Nation's Capital, on 7th and D St. NW; while most walk by the memorial, not knowing what it is or what it represents.

For more than 240 years, veterans have been incredibly active or "overrepresented" in policy and politics.

If anything, AMVETS would argue, of concern, are actually the reduction of veterans' representation in Congress and the United States Senate. Veterans generally identify first as military veterans and second with any party or ideology. In today's hyper-politicized environment, what we see are billions of dollars being spent on left or right political ideologies, that nearly approach the point of extremism or radicalism itself.

In the last decade, we have seen 100s of military veteran members of Congress pass away or leave office. For the first time, at least since World War II, Congress lacks senior leadership that shares military service as common background. And, alarmingly, Congress has the worst federal rate of hiring veterans with less than 2% of Congressional staff having military experience.

Seemingly, "nation before self" was largely replaced with far too many leaders focused on a form of rabid political party identity, far too many lawmakers who will do anything, say anything, so long as they maintain their seat in office. A "we need to win, they need to lose" mentality. A form of leadership that has pushed our nation to the edge of peril.

My recollection of some of our staunchest veteran leaders on Capitol Hill were individuals who cared deeply about their values, were respectful to everyone, fought hard, and then, most importantly, they found solutions that most could accept. They understood both the need and the value that compromise presented.

## **Positive Political and Civic Engagement**

Veterans do well when they have a positive group of fellow veterans in their lives. Since at least the Civil War, veterans have joined and organized groups that generally look to serve their fellow veterans and their communities. AMVETS' motto is Veterans Serving Veterans.

AMVETS boasts some 1,200 posts across the Nation. AMVETS has for 77 years committed itself to taking care of our fellow veterans, our troops, our families, and our communities. Today's servicemember is really no different in this regard. In some ways, veterans are changing how they join groups, and there are often more options available that focus on specific interests.

For example, young, recently separated servicemembers might join Student Veterans of America while pursuing their education. They might also join Team RWB because they like physical activity, while also joining an AMVETS post to be actively engaged in community service projects.

## **VA Funding for Peer-Oriented Programs is Nearly Non-Existent**

Congress has shown it understands the necessity of good mental health care for veterans though it has generally proposed the same ineffective policies for two decades. Lawmakers introduced 2,374 bills since 9/11 to improve veterans' mental health and prevent suicide. In this Congress alone, more than 221 bills have been introduced. Last Congress, 339 bills were introduced. But all that work and government spending has yet to hit the mark.

The most common policy ideas regarding veterans that have continued to pass into law and to be introduced have five similar general elements:

- Increase access to traditional mental healthcare (inclusive of telehealth proposals)
- Increase research funding (you name it, it's been thought of)
- Increase funding for mental health practitioners (inclusive of increased salaries for providers, increased space for practicing mental health, and scholarship dollars for those who provide it)
- Increased outreach and media to reach veterans in crisis
- Identifying at-risk veterans

Bill Number	Year of Passage	Title	Passed into law y/n?	Proposes to increase Access to Mental Health?	Proposes Research?	Proposes increase for mental health practitioners, space, or student loan programs for those practitioners?	Proposes outreach for suicide or mental health?	Proposes ways to identify and isolate at-risk veterans?
HR 327	2007	Joshua Omvig Veterans Suicide Prevention Act	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
HR 203	2015	Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
S 785	2019	Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
HR 8247	2020	Veterans Comprehensive Prevention, Access to Care, and Treatment Act of 2020	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

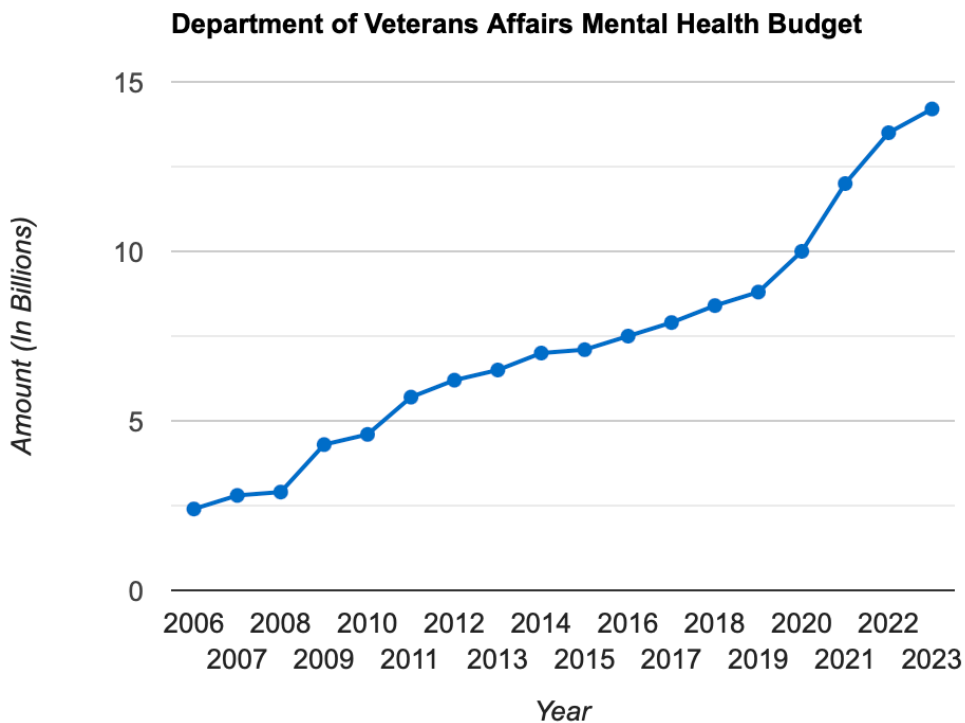
In general, these five bullets articulate the vast majority of legislative bills and laws that Congress has invested nearly \$104.1 billion in since 2006.

It's important to highlight what Congress has funded, because of what generally has been overlooked. While the budget is massive for ineffective traditional mental health approaches, what's lacking is funding for more proactive approaches to achieving a mentally healthy population of veterans. The bulk of positive veterans peer groups are provided by non-profit organizations. The bulk of funding in reality has been direct funding for the mental health industry, versus investments in veterans.

While the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019 provides some grant funding, initial responses to VA's proposed grant process have been lukewarm. We expect numerous non-profits to forgo the limited funding. An unfortunate reality, and certainly not what was intended by Congress.

Oddly enough, the standards and requirements for the VA grant program far exceed VA's own for funding tens of billions into its highly ineffective programs and services that result in the vast majority of participants dropping out, or taking pharmaceuticals.

AMVETS continues to support and advocate for better allocation of resources based on outcomes. As such, we support much stronger reporting and data requirements for existing VA Mental Health services. Despite over 100 billion spent, the suicide issue has only gotten worse, VA mental health dropout rates remain astronomical, and data highlighting positive longterm outcomes remains conveniently elusive.



### **The Opportunity to Recreate the Future of VA**

AMVETS is fully aware of the challenges of reorienting a VA system that so many veterans have come to rely on. Issues like extremism are particularly relevant to the overall challenge we face with veterans. Our current approach is a wasteful reactive system that addresses veterans once they hit rock bottom, has more than two decades of proven poor effectiveness, high drop out rates, record costs, and record suicide numbers. We need to build incentives and reprogram funding toward getting a better return on investment by allocating funds at transition and in support of veterans maintaining physical and mental health.

Veterans currently experiencing the lowest of lows would have benefited from a more proactive approach had it existed previously. We have to start somewhere because our current policy is misaligned, provides negative incentives, and leads to poor outcomes.

As such, we continue to strongly recommend that Congress create a new office with significant funding, we recommend \$1 billion dollars, to be achieved by not providing the casual, annual increase to the mental health budget. The office should be given the mission of creating the future goals and vision of a VA that focuses on veterans maintaining their warrior wellness and providing proactive outreach, training, peer support, personal leadership training, benefits, and services with the intent that they go on to live lives of purpose and meaning while maintaining a state of physical wellness, and understanding the components of living a mentally healthy lifestyle.

We envision a VA that uses technology, such as a digital assistant that would help guide veterans through their transition from military service. Veterans can articulate their goals, learn about VA programs and resources, and receive payment for their gym memberships or active lifestyle choices. They can be notified that they have not conducted their annual physical examination, they can link their digital assistant with a Garmin or Apple watch to conduct a physical wellness assessment, or to monitor key health metrics. VA can check in with the veterans at key touchpoints to see if they have interest in learning about VA home loans if they have not used them, provide them access to presentations on leadership from significant veterans in the community who can discuss well being, financial success, and their efforts to continue serving our nation. VA can lean more heavily on veterans who have overcome incredible odds and physical and mental barriers, to inspire and connect the veteran community. Let veterans know they are not alone, that to live is to struggle, and that VA is here to help them through tough times, and to help them get to their best days.

Oddly enough, VA is suddenly offering a \$15 million grant for a tech product that could theoretically reduce suicide by more than 10%. While the idea is perplexing that VA would throw out a grant equal to 1/1000 of its mental health budget and expect larger reductions in suicide than it has ever had with more than \$100 billion in funding over two decades, it does mark the need for a significant course correction. If technology is connected with a better overall system focused on veterans becoming the best version of themselves and moving away from the antiquated broken veteran model, we would expect to see significant drops in the overall rate of suicide.

Some of our overarching community goals should include: reducing dependency on disability payments and the system that incentivizes veterans to achieve 100% disability (and incentivizes disability to gain access to other hand-up programs such as VR&E), reducing healthcare costs related to poor lifestyle choices, reducing suicide, reducing the use of pharmaceuticals, reducing in-patient mental healthcare, and reducing traditional mental healthcare expenditures.

What can a \$300 billion budget accomplish if its primary goal is to help veterans live high-quality, happy, healthy, financially-secure lives? A correct answer to this important question would also hold the answer to the suicide epidemic.

Our VA rewards disability, messages suicide, fails to provide tangible leadership and training for veterans upon their separation from service, fails to articulate and encourage meaningful positive goals, and provides no incentive for physical, mental, and financial readiness.

We need our President and we need congressional leadership and vision to start articulating a better VA; a VA focused on helping veterans reach their full potential and be the warrior-citizens our country deserves. If we do these things, we also anticipate we would see a veteran population less prone to joining fringe and extreme liberal or conservative groups.

**Conclusion**

AMVETS is honored to have this opportunity to present our views and opinions to Congress. The topic at hand is unfortunate. Our political system is in major need of campaign finance reform, gerrymandering reform, and more thoughtful leadership by existing elected officials. Further, the broken VA mental health system continues to receive increased funding with no accountability for outcomes.

If we expect to have a physically and mentally healthy veterans population, then we need to make investments in efforts that work or are working. AMVETS believes the data available highlights how ineffective these approaches have been, and it is time for serious consideration to spending significant portions of that funding on more proactive, lower-cost approaches.

We look forward to continuing our work this Congress and stand at the ready to continue pressing on the many issues facing our veterans. We will always continue our work to create better policies for the veterans we serve.

**\*\*We have provided additional ideas for Congressional action in Appendix A. \*\***

## **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR JOSEPH CHENELLY**

Joseph R. Chenelly was appointed national executive director of the nation's fourth-largest veterans service organization in May 2016. In this capacity, he administers the policies of AMVETS, supervises its national headquarters operations and provides direction, as needed, to state and local components. Joe previously served as AMVETS' national communications director.

Joe is the first veteran of combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq to lead one of the nation's "big six" veterans service organizations' staffs.

A native of Rochester, N.Y., Joe enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps in 1998, serving with the 1st Marine Division, and was honorably discharged as a Staff Sergeant in April 2006. He is a combat veteran of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, having served in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Kuwait, East Timor and the Horn of Africa.

Joe became a veterans' advocate, a journalist, and a political adviser after his time in uniform. He covered military and veterans matters on staff with *Leatherneck* magazine, the *Military Times* newspapers, *USA TODAY* and *Gannet News*, reporting on operations in the Middle East, Southwest Asia, Africa, as well as disaster relief in the United States. Joe was named one of the 100 "most influential journalists covering armed violence" by Action on Armed Violence in 2013. He was the first U.S. Marine combat correspondent to step into enemy territory after September 11, 2001, as a military reporter in Pakistan and Afghanistan. He also reported from the front-lines with American and allied forces in Kuwait and Iraq as that war began.

He has also served as president of Social Communications, LLC, and as a civilian public affairs officer for Marine Corps Base Quantico, VA. Joe is an alumni of Syracuse University and Central Texas College. He resides in Fairport, N.Y., with his wife Dawn, a service connected disabled Air Force veteran, and their five children.

## **About AMVETS**

Today, AMVETS is America's most inclusive congressionally-chartered veterans service organization. Our membership is open to all active-duty, reservists, guardsmen and honorably discharged veterans. Accordingly, members of AMVETS have contributed to the defense of our nation in every conflict since World War II.

Our commitment to these men and women can also be traced to the aftermath of the last World War, when waves of former service members began returning stateside in search of the health, education and employment benefits they earned. Because obtaining these benefits proved difficult for many, veterans savvy at navigating the government bureaucracy began forming local groups to help their peers. As the ranks of our nation's veterans swelled into the millions, it became clear a national organization would be needed. Groups established to serve the veterans of previous wars wouldn't do either; the leaders of this new generation wanted an organization of their own.

With that in mind, 18 delegates, representing nine veterans' clubs, gathered in Kansas City, Missouri and founded The American Veterans of World War II on Dec. 10, 1944. Less than three years later, on July 23, 1947, President Harry S. Truman signed Public Law 216, making AMVETS the first post-World War II organization to be chartered by Congress.

Since then, our congressional charter was amended to admit members from subsequent eras of service. Our organization has also changed over the years, evolving to better serve these more recent generations of veterans and their families. In furtherance of this goal, AMVETS maintains partnerships with other Congressionally-chartered veterans' service organizations that round out what's called the "Big Six" coalition. We're also working with newer groups, including Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America and The Independence Fund. Moreover, AMVETS recently teamed up with the VA's Office of Suicide Prevention and Mental Health to help stem the epidemic of veterans' suicide. As our organization looks to the future, we do so hand in hand with those who share our commitment to serving the defenders of this nation. We hope the 116th Session of Congress will join in our conviction by casting votes and making policy decisions that protect our veterans.

### **Information Required by Rule XI 2(g) of the House of Representatives**

Pursuant to Rule XI 2(g) of the House of Representatives, the following information is provided regarding federal grants and contracts.

Fiscal Year 2021 - None

Fiscal Year 2020 - None

Fiscal Year 2019 - None

Disclosure of Foreign Payments – None

## APPENDIX A

### Uncommon policy ideas/approaches that have not been attempted, introduced, or passed into law over the past two decades:

- An impactful hearing that includes new voices tackling mental health who can help inform new possibilities in your draft legislation. The committee has been guided by the mental health and pharmaceutical industries for far too long, which have failed to provide meaningful outcomes via their policy recommendations. Instead, we recommend hearing the voices of those working on alternative approaches at the ground level, such as Boulder Crest Retreat, Sheep Dog Impact Assistance, Big Red Barn Retreat, Camp Southern Ground, and the Permission to Start Dreaming Foundation. Additionally, we recommend including the authors of the recent JAMA reports highlighting VA program ineffectiveness, the authors of the Clay Hunt SAV Act reports, and individuals who researched alternative models being influential in the non-profit space. If we don't fully embrace and understand what is working well, what is not working, and what is kind of working, we will be unable to start charting effective models moving forward. More voices are needed.
- There is no longitudinal data measuring outcomes related to veterans that partake in existing programs and services. I.E. Do these programs and services have any meaningful long-term impact on veterans' quality of life? For example, data from the Clay Hunt SAV act reports, and JAMA articles, are concerning in the short term, yet there is no longitudinal data despite all of the funding for research.
- There is no research on VA programs and services' extraordinarily high dropout rates. Why do most veterans simply drop out of VA programs and services? Where do they go? What happens to those veterans? No one knows...
- There are nearly no investments in proactive training for servicemembers and veterans to learn about the core concepts of what it takes to maintain a status of being mentally healthy. The antidote to suicide is not a public health model combatting suicide; it's helping veterans live lives worth living with purpose and meaning. Instead, we are spending the vast majority of our funds in a non-proactive manner.
- The total investment in new and novel approaches for mental health totals .25% of the overall budget; we simply need more invested in promising programs, policies, and services. As we did last year, AMVETS recommends spending the entirety of any proposed budget increase for VA Mental Health on a VA/DOD Mental Health Center for Innovation. Any mental health increase in the budget should not be used as additional funding for approaches that fail far too many veterans, far too often, or for increasing access to those treatments. Instead, we should use this funding as an investment to incubate, test, and scale approaches that are proving to be effective. The majority of this funding should be allocated to fund alternative, novel, and non-pharmacological methods such as Post Traumatic Growth, recreational therapy, yoga, and others that VA has not fully embraced, tried, or tested.
- Lastly, our messaging to veterans is poor. We are telling veterans they are suicidal and broken. We want VA to reconsider its messaging to reflect what we want veterans to feel and act like. There is significant room for improvement on this front.