

**STATEMENT OF
THE HONORABLE MIKE COFFMAN (CO-06)
BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

April 13, 2018

Chairman Wenstrup and Ranking Member Brownley, thank you for allowing me to present H.R. 4635, The Peer-2-Peer Counseling Act that I introduced with Congresswoman Esty to improve VA counseling afforded to female veterans. I would also like to thank the members of the subcommittee who co-sponsored H.R. 4635 - Rep Bilirakis, Rep Radewagen, Rep O'Rourke, Rep Rutherford, and Rep Gonzalez-Colon.

Currently, female Veterans make up 10% of our nation's veteran population and this population is expected to grow to 15% by 2030. Over the past 10 years, the VA has seen a 45% increase in the number of female veterans using VA benefits, demonstrating that female veterans are relying more and more on VA services. As the female veteran population increases, it is critical for VA to meet future demand.

One area of need among female veterans that warrants our particular attention is peer-to-peer counseling. Unfortunately, many female veterans have experienced sexual trauma and PTSD while serving in the military and are also suffering from other mental conditions that put them at risk for homelessness. Peer counseling can help female veterans who are facing these critical issues.

The VA's 2016 suicide data report found that the risk of suicide for female veterans was 2.4 times higher than non-veteran adult females and the rates of suicide increase more among women than men. This data is disturbing. We owe it to our female veterans to ensure sufficient resources are available to assist with gender-specific needs and that is why I introduced H.R. 4635, The Peer-2-Peer Counseling Act.

H.R. 4635 enhances the VA's existing Peer-to-Peer program, which has been successful in providing peer counseling to all veterans, by ensuring the current program has a sufficient quantity of female peer counselors for female veterans who are separating or newly separated from military service. Ideal counselors will have expertise in gender-specific issues, VA services and benefits focused on women, as well as employment mentoring.

The act would also emphasize counseling services for female veterans who have suffered sexual trauma while serving in the military, have PTSD or any other mental health condition, or female veterans who are at risk for homelessness.

To ensure these counseling services are not only available but also known throughout the veteran community, H.R. 4635 directs the VA Secretary to conduct outreach to inform female veterans about the peer-to-peer program and the services available to women.

Finally, H.R. 4635 authorizes the VA Secretary to facilitate engagement and coordination with community organizations, state and local governments, institutions of higher learning, and local

business organizations. With the help from our communities, we can leverage resources and expertise that exists within our communities.

The Peer-2-Peer Counseling Act ensures VA's peer-to-peer program is better postured to address the gender-specific needs of women veterans and updates this vitally important program to better represent the growing veteran population it serves.

Mr. Chairman, I encourage my colleagues to support this important legislation and I yield back the remainder of my time.