



**American
Foundation
for Suicide
Prevention**

October 11, 2021

**American Foundation for Suicide Prevention
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Subcommittee on Health Legislative Hearing**

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) is pleased to submit written testimony on priorities related to Veteran suicide prevention. We thank Chairwoman Brownley, Ranking Member Bergman, and Members of the Subcommittee on Health for holding this hearing and inviting AFSP to provide feedback on this crucial matter.

AFSP is the nation's largest nonprofit dedicated to saving lives and bringing hope to those effected by suicide. AFSP has Chapters in all 50 states and sponsors a variety of community-based programming across the country each year. AFSP supports legislation that prioritizes suicide prevention for Veterans, Service members, and their families. There is no single cause of suicide among Veterans and Service members, but by treating and preventing mental health and substance use conditions and empowering Veterans and Service members to live and thrive in their communities, we can save lives. Thank you again for the opportunity to share information on Veteran suicide prevention and mental health with you.

Suicide Prevention and Veterans

With over ten million Americans¹ living with serious thoughts of suicide, over one million² suicide attempts annually, and as a leading cause of death in the country, suicide is a national public health crisis that requires robust investment and response that is commensurate with the scope of the problem. We have seen a 35% increase in the national suicide rate from 1999 through 2018³ (and fortunately two years of declining numbers of suicides, 2% decrease in 2019 and preliminary numbers showing a 5% decrease in 2020)⁴. Despite the recent decrease in the national suicide rate, suicide remains a national public health crisis.

Suicide however does not impact all populations in the same way, and so we must pay special attention to vulnerable populations, which includes Veterans. In 2019, Veterans reflected a suicide rate 52.3% higher than non-Veterans in the U.S, which further emphasizes the need for innovative legislative action to support initiatives to end Veteran suicide.⁵ However, from 2018 to 2019, Veteran suicide rates decreased by 7.2%, compared to 1.8% among non-Veterans.⁶

¹Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic (CDC, 2020):
https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6932a1.htm?s_cid=mm6932a1_w

²NIMH Suicide Statistics Webpage (NIMH, 2021):
[https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/suicide#:~:text=During%20that%2020%2Dyear%20period,females%20\(6.2%20per%20100%2C000\)](https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/suicide#:~:text=During%20that%2020%2Dyear%20period,females%20(6.2%20per%20100%2C000))

³ Increase in Suicide Mortality in the United States, 1999-2018 (CDC National Center for Health Statistics, 2020):
<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db362.htm>

⁴https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2778234?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=newsletter_axiosvitals&stream=top

⁵ <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2021/2021-National-Veteran-Suicide-Prevention-Annual-Report-FINAL-9-8-21.pdf>

⁶ Ibid.

Despite this decrease, 6,261 Veterans died by suicide in 2019, and any death by suicide is one too many. Further targeted legislative advances and investments are key to preventing suicide in the Veteran community. AFSP appreciates the Subcommittee's consideration of how the following pieces of legislation may improve access to care and help to prevent Veteran suicides.

AFSP is pleased to support the following Veteran suicide prevention bills before the Subcommittee and urges approval without delay.

- [*Veterans' Culturally Competent Care Act*](#) (H.R. 4627) would improve Veteran mental health care by establishing standards and requirements for non-Department mental health care providers participating in the VA's Community Care program.
- [*Veterans Peer Specialist Act of 2021*](#) (H.R. 4575) would expand the VA's peer specialist support program to more adequately connect Veterans to peers for mental health purposes.
- [*Expanding the Veterans Access to Mental Health Act*](#) (H.R. 5029) would improve Vet Center readjustment counseling and related mental health services for loss survivors of Veteran suicide.
- [*Revising and Expediting Actions for the Crisis Hotline \(REACH\) for Veterans Act*](#) (H.R. 5073) will work to improve the Veterans Crisis Line, especially as the Veterans Crisis Line transitions to 988 by July of 2022.
- [*VA Governors Challenge Expansion Act of 2021*](#) (H.R. 5317) would provide technical assistance for development of Veteran suicide prevention activities to States and American Indian and Alaska Native tribes.
- [*Veterans Census-Enabled National Treatment Equitable Resources Supplement \(Vet CENTERS\) for Mental Health Act of 2021*](#) (discussion draft) would increase the number of Vet Centers in certain States based on population needs to better support Veteran mental health needs.
- [*VITAL Assessment Act*](#) (discussion draft) which requires the VA to report to Congress within one year of enactment of the Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership (VITAL) program, key data around student Veteran mental health and suicide.

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention is grateful for the Subcommittee's continued support of suicide prevention efforts and looks forward to additional conversations to help bolster Veteran suicide prevention efforts. Please do not hesitate to contact Natalie Tietjen, Manager of Federal Policy (ntietjen@afsp.org) on my staff with additional questions or for clarifications.

Laurel Stine, J.D., M.A.
Senior Vice President, Public Policy
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention