



Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

October 13, 2021

Dear Chairwoman Brownley, Ranking Member Bergman and Members of the Subcommittee,

As a fellow member of this subcommittee I write to thank you for holding this important hearing on legislation to improve the health care benefits we provide to the veterans who have served our country. One of this committee's most enduring goals has always been to provide veterans with the world-class health care they have earned and deserve after their service. This includes expanding access to mental health care and making sure that any veteran who comes to VA for care, leaves feeling supported and heard in their journey with mental health care, however that looks for each individual veteran.

Research has shown that in non-VA clinical settings, patients who receive support from peer specialists are less likely to need inpatient care, more likely to engage with their community and treatment, and more likely to report higher satisfaction and quality of life. It is clear that shared experiences and peer support creates meaningful and empowering relationships, and veterans who are going through their own unique experiences during treatment may be best suited to support their fellow veterans as they seek care. Veterans helping veterans is always a great foundation to build upon. The VA MISSION Act, which became law in 2018, recognized this and established the peer specialist program as an important support program for veterans across the country.

The peer specialist support program allows VA to hire peer counseling specialists who can help fellow veterans access health services and navigate VA's health care system, while also teaching coping and positive health-affirming behaviors. This allows veterans in recovery the chance to share what they've learned, and their fellow veterans the ability to have hands-on support throughout their recovery journey.

While this has led to great success, it is important that veterans at all VA Medical Centers (VAMC) across the country have access to this program. The Veteran Peer Specialist Act expands this program and builds upon its success in assisting veterans by expanding it to every VAMC over the next five years. Additionally, the bill prioritizes expansion to VAMCs in rural areas or areas not near an active military installation, and also adds a requirement that the hiring of peer specialists reflect the racial and ethnic demographics of the veteran population, to ensure that veterans are supported no matter where they live or the color of their skin.

As a co-lead of this important bill, I want to sincerely thank the committee for considering it at this hearing today, and urge my fellow subcommittee members to support this bill. We are committed to supporting veterans' mental health and this bill is an important step to doing just that.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Colin Allred".

Colin Allred
Member of Congress