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**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD**

**AMERICAN PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION**

**FOR THE**

**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS**

**IN ADVANCE OF**

**JUNE 9, 2022**

**LEGISLATIVE HEARING**

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) appreciates the opportunity to submit testimony to the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Veterans Affairs in advance of its legislative hearing. As the largest professional association for mental health physicians representing more than 37,000 psychiatrists, and the umbrella organization for state societies across the country, APA appreciates the ongoing efforts of the Subcommittee to address persistent challenges our nation's Veterans face in accessing quality mental health care and suicide prevention services. We are grateful for your attention to the mental health needs of our nation's Veterans and especially encouraged by the inclusion of VA Zero Suicide Demonstration Project Act of 2021 (H.R. 6273) in this hearing.

### **Veterans Mental Health**

Unfortunately, the common stressors of transitioning from military life, traumatic brain injury, and other mental health consequences of military service, often place veterans of our Armed Forces at greater risk for suicidal ideations and behavioral health disorders. Tragically, suicide is the 10<sup>th</sup> leading cause of death in the U.S. and Veterans are at a higher risk for suicide when compared to the rest of the US population. In 2017, the suicide rate for Veterans was 1.5 times the rate for non-Veteran adults, with approximately 17 Veterans dying by suicide each day and over 6,000 Veterans dying by suicide each year.<sup>1,2</sup> This means that despite accounting for just 7.9% of the population, Veterans account for 13.5% of all suicide deaths in the United States. These pre-existing trends in Veterans mental health have only been exacerbated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Veterans, like many Americans, have struggled with the downstream consequences of the global health emergency including high unemployment rates, extended periods of social isolation, and the loss of loved ones. Each of these factors alone could increase feelings of anxiety, depression, and other mental health disorders. However, when added to the challenges Veterans already experience, such stressors can exacerbate mental health conditions in this at-risk population.

### **Zero Suicide Model**

The Zero Suicide framework is an evidence-based initiative aimed at improving suicide and mental health care within our health care systems. The foundation of the approach is the knowledge that suicide is preventable and that health care systems are critical in its prevention because suicide patients often receive services in the year leading up to their attempt or death. The Zero Suicide model utilizes a system-wide approach to mental and substance use disorder services and aims to improve outcomes and close gaps in care. It represents a culture shift away from fragmented suicide care toward a holistic and comprehensive approach to patient safety and quality improvement. Zero Suicide recognizes that people experiencing suicidal thoughts often “fall through the cracks” and that there is an opportunity for our health care systems to prioritize the care they receive by using evidence-based tools, systematic practices, training, and embedded workflows. Continuous process improvement likewise drives the Zero Suicide framework to ensure organizations deliver quality care and routinely examine outcomes. Most importantly, the Zero Suicide model has seen enormous success, with some health care systems experiencing a 75% reduction rate in suicide among patients, countering prevailing national trends which have shown increased rates of suicide.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2019/2019\\_National\\_Veteran\\_Suicide\\_Prevention\\_Annual\\_Report\\_508.pdf](https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2019/2019_National_Veteran_Suicide_Prevention_Annual_Report_508.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2019/2019\\_National\\_Veteran\\_Suicide\\_Prevention\\_Annual\\_Report\\_508.pdf](https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2019/2019_National_Veteran_Suicide_Prevention_Annual_Report_508.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Coffey, C.E. (2007). Building a system of perfect depression care in behavioral health. *Joint Commission Journal on Quality and Patient Safety* 33(4):193-9.

## **VA Zero Suicide Demonstration Project Act of 2021**

With the aim of bringing Veteran suicide deaths to zero, the American Psychiatric Association enthusiastically supports *the VA Zero Suicide Demonstration Project Act of 2021*. By implementing Zero Suicide pilot programs at five VA medical centers across the country, this important legislation would increase access to safer and concurrent suicide care. Bringing the Zero Suicide model of care to our Veterans will help foster a cultural shift toward comprehensive suicide treatment and represent an important step in our ongoing effort to give those who defend our country the support and resources they deserve. This important legislation will benefit Veterans by improving behavioral health outcomes and reducing suicide. We thank the Committee for its consideration and strongly encourage support for this laudable measure