To improve cybersecurity practices and improve digital literacy among veterans, and for other purposes.

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Ms. SLOTKIN introduced the following bill; which was referred to the Committee on ________________

A BILL

To improve cybersecurity practices and improve digital literacy among veterans, and for other purposes.

1 Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-
2 tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,
3 SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.
4 This Act may be cited as the “Empowering Veterans
5 Against Cyberthreats Act of 2022”.
6 SEC. 2. FINDINGS.
7 Congress finds the following:
8 (1) Adversaries from Russia, China, and Iran
9 are using information warfare to influence democ-
racies across the world, and extremist organizations
often use digital communications to recruit mem-
bers. Influence campaigns from foreign adversaries
reached tens of millions of voters during the 2016
and 2018 elections with racially and divisively tar-
geted messages. The United States can fight these
influences by ensuring that citizens of the United
States possess the necessary skills to discern
disinformation and misinformation and protect
themselves from foreign influence campaigns.

(2) Researchers have documented persistent,
pervasive, and coordinated online targeting of mem-
ers of the Armed Forces, veterans, and their fami-
lies by foreign adversaries seeking to undermine
United States democracy in part because of public
trust placed in these communities.

(3) A 2017 report by the University of Oxford’s
Graphika Institute, titled “Social Media
Disinformation Campaigns Against US Military Per-
sonnel and Veterans”, concluded that “The public
tends to place trust in military personnel and vet-
erans, making them potentially influential voters and
community leaders. Given this trust and their role in
ensuring national security, these individuals have the
potential to become particular targets for influence
operations and information campaigns conducted on social media. There are already reports of US service personnel being confronted by foreign intelligence agencies while posted abroad, with details of their personal lives gleaned from social media.”.

(4) The Select Committee on Intelligence of the Senate found in its investigation of the interference in the 2016 election that social media posts by the Internet Research Agency (IRA) of Russia reached tens of millions of voters in 2016 and were meant to pit the people of the United States against one another and sow discord. Volume II of the Committee’s investigation found that the Internet Research Agency’s Instagram account with the second largest reach used the handle “@american.veterans” and was “aimed at patriotic, conservative audiences, collected 215,680 followers, and generated nearly 18.5 million engagements.”.

(5) A 2019 investigative report by the Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) titled “An Investigation into Foreign Entities who are Targeting Troops and Veterans Online”, found that the Internet Research Agency targeted veterans and the followers of several congressionally chartered veterans service organizations with at least 113 advertisements during
and following the 2016 election and that “this represents a fraction of the Russian activity that targeted this community with divisive propaganda.”. The report also found that foreign actors have been impersonating veterans through social-media accounts and interacting with veterans and veterans groups on social media to spread propaganda and disinformation. To counter these acts, Vietnam Veterans of America recommended that the Department of Veterans Affairs “immediately develop plans to make the cyber-hygiene of veterans an urgent priority within the Department of Veterans Affairs. The VA must educate and train veterans on personal cybersecurity: how to mitigate vulnerabilities, vigilantly maintain safe practices, and recognize threats, including how to identify instances of online manipulation.”.

(6) The Cyberspace Solarium Commission, a bicameral and bipartisan commission, established by section 1652 of the John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019 (Public Law 115–232), concluded in its finished report that the “U.S. government should promote digital literacy, civics education, and public awareness to build societal resilience to foreign, malign cyber-en-
abled information operations and that the U.S. govern-
ment must ensure that individual Americans have both the digital literacy tools and the civics edu-
cation they need to secure their networks and their democracy from cyber-enabled information oper-
ations.”. The report recommended that Congress au-
thorizing grant programs to do this.

SEC. 3. SENSE OF CONGRESS.

It is the sense of Congress that, given the threat for-
eign influence campaigns pose for United States democ-
and the findings and recommendations of Congress and experts, Congress must immediately act to pass legis-
measures to increase digital and media literacy as well as cyber-hygiene among veterans of the United States.

SEC. 4. VETERANS CYBERSECURITY AND DIGITAL LIT-
ERACY GRANT PROGRAM.

(a) PROGRAM REQUIRED.—The Secretary shall es-
tablish a program to promote digital citizenship and media literacy, through which the Secretary shall award grants to eligible entities to enable those eligible entities to carry out the activities described in subsection (c).

(b) APPLICATION.—An eligible entity seeking a grant under the program required by subsection (a) shall submit to the Secretary an application therefor at such time, in
such manner, and containing such information as the Secretary may require, including, at a minimum the following:

(1) A description of the activities the eligible entity intends to carry out with the grant funds.

(2) An estimate of the costs associated with such activities.

(3) Such other information and assurances as the Secretary may require.

(e) ACTIVITIES.—An eligible entity shall use the amount of a grant awarded under the program required by subsection (a) to carry out one or more of the following activities to improve cyber-hygiene and increase digital and media literacy among veterans:

(1) Develop competencies in cyber-hygiene.

(2) Develop media literacy and digital citizenship competencies by promoting veterans’—

(A) research and information fluency;

(B) critical thinking and problem solving skills;

(C) technology operations and concepts;

(D) information and technological literacy;

(E) concepts of media and digital representation and stereotyping;

(F) understanding of explicit and implicit media and digital messages;
(G) understanding of values and points of view that are included and excluded in media and digital content;

(H) understanding of how media and digital content may influence ideas and behaviors;

(I) understanding of the importance of obtaining information from multiple media sources and evaluating sources for quality;

(J) understanding how information on digital platforms can be altered through algorithms, editing, and augmented reality;

(K) ability to create media and digital content in civically and socially responsible ways;

and

(L) understanding of influence campaigns conducted by foreign adversaries and the tactics employed by foreign adversaries for conducting influence campaigns.

(d) REPORTING.—

(1) REPORTS BY GRANT RECIPIENTS.—Each recipient of a grant under the program required by subsection (a) shall, not later than one year after the date on which the recipient first receives funds pursuant to the grant, submit to the Secretary a report describing the activities the recipient carried
out using grant funds and the effectiveness of those activities.

(2) Report by the Secretary.—Not later than 90 days after the date on which the Secretary receives the last report the Secretary expects to receive under paragraph (1), the Secretary shall submit to Congress a report describing the activities carried out under this section and the effectiveness of those activities.

(c) Sense of Congress.—It is the sense of Congress that the Secretary should—

(1) establish and maintain a list of eligible entities that receive a grant under the program required by subsection (a), and individuals designated by those eligible entities as participating individuals; and

(2) make that list available to those eligible entities and participating individuals in order to promote communication and further exchange of information regarding sound digital citizenship and media literacy practices among recipients of grants under the program required by subsection (a).

(f) Authorization of Appropriations.—There is authorized to be appropriated to carry out this section
$20,000,000 for each of fiscal years 2022, 2024, and 2026.

(g) DEFINITIONS.—In this section:

(1) CYBER-HYGIENE.—The term “cyber-hygiene” means practices and steps that users of computers and other internet connected devices take to maintain and improve online security, maintain the proper functioning of computers devices, and protect computers and devices from cyberattacks and unauthorized use.

(2) DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP.—The term “digital citizenship” means the ability to—

(A) safely, responsibly, and ethically use communication technologies and digital information technology tools and platforms;

(B) create and share media content using principles of social and civic responsibility and with awareness of the legal and ethical issues involved; and

(C) participate in the political, economic, social, and cultural aspects of life related to technology, communications, and the digital world by consuming and creating digital content, including media.
(3) **ELIGIBLE ENTITY.**—The term “eligible entity” means—

(A) a civil society organization, including community groups, nongovernmental organizations, nonprofit organization, labor organizations, indigenous groups, charitable organizations, professional associations, and foundations; and

(B) congressionally chartered veterans service organizations.

(4) **MEDIA LITERACY.**—The term “media literacy” means the ability to—

(A) access relevant and accurate information through media in a variety of forms;

(B) critically analyze media content and the influences of different forms of media;

(C) evaluate the comprehensiveness, relevance, credibility, authority, and accuracy of information;

(D) make educated decisions based on information obtained from media and digital sources;

(E) operate various forms of technology and digital tools; and
(F) reflect on how the use of media and technology may affect private and public life.

(5) SECRETARY.—The term “Secretary” means the Secretary of Veterans Affairs.