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BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
ON REDUCING VETERAN SUICIDE BY
ADDRESSING ECONOMIC RISK FACTORS**

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Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today about reducing military and Veteran suicide by addressing economic risk factors.

Introduction

In 2019, 45,861 adult Americans died by suicide¹. Of those, 6,261 were Veterans. The rate of Veteran suicide deaths per year is substantially higher than the rate among non-Veteran US adults. These numbers are more than statistics and they reflect individual lives ended before their full stories were written. With each loss, we continue to rededicate our commitment to the mission to address suicide as a national public health concern. Suicide has no single cause and there is no one set solution.

Multiple individual and societal factors contribute to a complex interaction of stressors at several levels: international, national, community, familial, economic and individual. Financial stress and uncertainty, such as job loss, long periods of unemployment, reduced income, difficulty paying for medical, food, and housing expenses, and even the fear or anticipation of financial stress, may increase the risk of suicide.² Economic and financial strain are associated with adverse mental health outcomes such as depression, anxiety, and substance abuse, and may indirectly increase suicide risk by exacerbating existing physical and mental health problems.^{3 4}

The sociocultural context of suicide suggests that a national plan to end suicide is needed, and this plan should embrace a systematic, public health approach combining both community-based prevention strategies and clinically-based interventions. The Office of the U.S. Surgeon General collaborated with the National

¹ 2021 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Preventing Suicide: A Technical Package of Policy, Programs, and Practices. Accessed May 3, 2022, at <https://www.cdc.gov/suicide/pdf/suicideTechnicalPackage.pdf>

³ Panchal, N., Kamal, R., Orgera, K., Cox, C., Garfield, R., Hamel, L., Muñana, C., Chidambaram, P. The implications of COVID-19 for mental health and substance use. Kaiser Family Foundation. 2020 (Coronavirus Issue Brief). Accessed May 3, 2022, at <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issuebrief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/>

⁴ Madsen J, Harris KM (2021) Negative self-appraisal: Personal reasons for dying as indicators of suicidality. PLoS ONE 16(2): e0246341. Accessed May 24, 2021, at <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0246341>.

Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention to create the 2012 National Strategy for Suicide Prevention, which reflected this public health approach, and we built upon these efforts in expanding the comprehensive public health approach to suicide prevention for Veterans with the development of the *National Strategy for Preventing Veteran Suicide* in 2018.⁵

Within this public health approach, we hold to the following three major tenets that drive our mission alongside Government partners, agency partners and community organizations: (1) Suicide is preventable; (2) Suicide prevention requires a public health approach, combining clinical and community-based strategies; and (3) Everyone has a role to play in suicide prevention.

We highlight this information as a reminder that there is always hope, as we continue to move together to end military and Veteran suicide. As the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) work continues, I would like to focus on the steps VA is taking to reduce military and Veteran suicide, to include promoting mental health care access, addressing economic risk factors, promoting economic well-being and supporting Service members, Veterans and their families.

The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), in conjunction with the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and other Federal agencies and partners are mutually reinforcing by offering programs, services, and benefits that address the various risk and protective factors for suicide. The President's strategy for reducing military and Veteran suicide includes an increased emphasis on promoting economic well-being, reducing housing and food insecurity, and supporting Service members, Veterans, and their families in the transition to civilian life.

Mental Health Care Support During Military to Civilian Transition

The first year of transition out of military service is crucial for Service members and Veterans. VA research shows that the first year following discharge from active-duty service may pose significant challenges to Veterans, including housing instability and homelessness, family reintegration, unemployment or under-employment, posttraumatic stress disorder and substance use, all of which can increase the risk for suicide. VA can provide emergency mental health care at VA medical care facilities to anyone in need, and we have specialized programs available for Veterans and former Service members, including those with an Other than Honorable discharge. VA may provide additional ongoing mental health care to certain former Service members who are not enrolled in the VA health care system. This important information, along with other mental health resources and care, is shared with transitioning Service members (TSM) and Veterans in multiple touchpoints throughout their transition journey.

⁵ Department of Veterans Affairs (2018). National Strategy for Preventing Veteran Suicide. Washington, DC. Available at https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention/docs/Office-of-Mental-Health-and-Suicide-Prevention-National-Strategy-for-Preventing-Veterans-Suicide.pdf.

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) calls Service members within 30 days of separation to answer enrollment and benefit questions, processes VA health care enrollment applications over the phone and assists Veterans with setting up their first VA medical appointments. Over the first 3 years of operations (Fiscal Year [FY] 2018, FY 2019 and FY 2020), VA attempted over 160,000 contacts, resulting in a successful contact rate of 30%.

Transition Assistance Program

VA is committed to ensuring today's Service members are appropriately and adequately prepared to transition to civilian life and seek a meaningful post-military career with established post-military support. Launched in 1991 and refined by the Veterans Opportunity to Work to Hire Heroes Act of 2011 (P.L. 112-56), the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is an interagency effort designed to help the approximately 200,000 Service members who separate annually successfully transition to civilian life.

Since 2014, with the support of a memorandum of understanding (MOU), VA, the Department of Defense (DoD), the Department of Labor, the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Education, the Small Business Administration, the Office of Personnel Management and other partners coordinate the execution of TAP to provide information, counseling, resources and tools for Service members and their families to support a smooth and successful transition from military to civilian life. The MOU also provides a robust governance structure, including multiple working groups, to address the various aspects of the transition process. The governance structure is comprised of representatives from each branch of the military and interagency partners to serve as subject matter experts in areas of executive leadership or content knowledge that support TAP maturation efforts. The working groups meet regularly, ranging from monthly to quarterly cadences, to identify opportunities to improve TAP and the transition experience for TSMs and their families.

As part of the TAP curriculum, the VA Benefits and Services course helps Service members understand how to navigate VA and obtain the benefits and services they have earned through their military careers. VA TAP provides the skills, resources and tools Service members need to achieve emotional/mental health, physical health, career readiness and economic stability in civilian life. VA specifically addresses mental health and suicide during the VA Benefits and Services Course, Module 5: *Maintaining Your Health*. VA provides an overview of VA mental health care services, explains why mental well-being is important, describes the mental health care services that VA provides, discusses suicide risk factors and prevention and provides a list of available mental health programs and resources.

VA continues to work with its interagency partners to identify and serve TSMs and Veterans at risk for homelessness—not only through referrals to appropriate Federal programs, but through help with housing solutions, employment opportunities, health care, justice and reentry-related services and more. As part of the VA Benefits and Services course during TAP, TSMs are informed of several resources available to

assist in finding a place to live including facility locator tools, Home Loan Guaranty and housing grants, homeless programs and state and local benefits.

In addition to the VA Benefits and Services course, which gives a broad overview of available resources, Service members and their families may access Military Life Cycle (MLC) modules to plan for the future. MLC modules are 45- to 60-minute information sessions that may be taken at any time throughout a Service member's career. They are especially valuable after major events like permanent changes of station, marriage or the birth of a child. They offer connections to a lifelong support system from the first duty station to separation and beyond. Each MLC module addresses a specific in-depth topic such as benefits; education; home loans or life insurance; social and emotional health resources; integration into a civilian community; or survivor and casualty assistance. During FY 2021, over 150,000 attendees took VA transition courses online.

VA is committed to addressing military to civilian transition holistically. Military spouses and caregivers are eligible to attend VA Benefits and Services briefings and access MLC modules. Family members may access the courses online through TAPevents.org. A Common Access Card-enabled device is not required to access the courses. VA Benefits Advisors are also available through one-on-one assistance sessions to answer questions, explain benefits and connect spouses to helpful resources, including mental health, education and employment benefits.

VA Solid Start

The first year after separation from military service poses challenges for recently separated Veterans that can make it difficult to adjust to civilian life, and for some, increase their risk of suicide. To provide added support during this critical period, and to support VA's efforts to address Executive Order 13822, the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) launched VA Solid Start (VASS) in December 2019. VASS provides early and consistent caring contact to newly separated Veterans at least three times during their critical first year of transition from the military (0-90-, 91-180-, 181-365- days post-discharge from active duty). Specially trained VA representatives address issues or challenges identified by Veterans during these calls and assist them with accessing benefits, services, health care (including mental health care), education and employment opportunities. After each successful connection, the Veteran receives a comprehensive follow-up email from the VASS representative that provides information on all issues discussed and lists connections for additional support and assistance. This email specifically provides contact information for service organizations and connections to state Veteran resources, based on information provided by the Veteran as to where they currently or intend to reside. In FY 2021, VASS made over 149,000 successful connections with Veterans throughout their first year following military separation. VASS also provides priority contact to individuals who had a mental health care appointment during the last year of active duty, supporting a successful transition to VA mental health care treatment. The program successfully connected

with 24,233 priority Veterans who previously had a mental health care appointment in the last year of active duty, representing a 75% successful connection rate in FY 2021.

VA SkillBridge

To support Service members entering VA careers, VA successfully launched an umbrella for programs across VA known as VA SkillBridge in February 2020. VA SkillBridge provides active duty TSMs with employment training, internship and apprenticeship opportunities during their last 180 days of service. The program provides TSMs with valuable civilian work experience to better prepare them for post-separation employment. VA SkillBridge is executed in partnership with DoD via the December 2019 MOU formalizing VA's role as a Federal employment partner organization supporting the DoD SkillBridge program. Since the launch in February 2020, VA has engaged with 18 organizations that either established or are interested in establishing a VA SkillBridge program for TSMs under the MOU.

VA SkillBridge encountered some issues during the pandemic, where large cohorts at installation training facilities closed, such as the VA Security Service Training facility in Arkansas and the Warrior Training Advancement Course classrooms on three DoD installations, including Fort Stewart, Fort Hood and Fort Carson. VA instituted virtual curricula to ensure programs could continue to meet Veterans' needs despite the challenges. VA will continue to support VA SkillBridge programs by developing marketing materials tailored to drive program participation interest via virtual engagements with TSMs, in lieu of the traditional installation-level engagement. Additionally, to ensure TSMs know about VA SkillBridge, VA is requiring its VA Benefits Advisors to discuss this career readiness opportunity during the "Getting Career Ready" module of the VA TAP Benefits and Services course.

Economic Development Initiatives

VA understands that economic well-being for the Veteran community requires it to improve opportunities as well as long-term economic sustainability for TSMs and Veterans. To meet this need, VA launched Economic Development Initiatives (EDI), which connect TSMs, newly separated Veterans and military spouses in specific geographic communities with information and resources to promote economic well-being. Such resources can include town hall meetings, stakeholder roundtables, benefits fairs, claims clinics, hiring fairs and workshops. Other resources are available based on the needs of the community, such as spouse transition assistance, suicide prevention and awareness and engagements with local businesses.

There is a three-part process for the selection of EDI locations: 1) identification of a Qualified Opportunity Zone, 2) identification of Economically Distressed Areas and 3) determination of focus areas and challenge criteria that highlight regional hardships that TSMs, Veterans, spouses, their family members and caregivers face. The event model may vary from region to region based on community and population needs. Most event models include follow-up sessions to measure input and outcomes, and present the

opportunity to review proposed strategic implementation, as well as identify the required next steps. Since the program's inception in 2018, VBA conducted six initial EDI and eight follow-up EDI events. The EDIs in Puerto Rico successfully resulted in 135 onsite job interviews, more than \$260,000 issued in retroactive VA benefits, and one-on-one claims assistance provided to an estimated 900 Veterans from the VA claims clinics.

Personalized Career Planning and Guidance

On January 4, 2021, VA launched the rebranded Chapter 36 Educational and Career Counseling program, now known as Personalized Career Planning and Guidance (PCPG). PCPG provides beneficiaries with enhanced career counseling, assessment, education planning and guidance resources to achieve personal, career and education goals. VA enhanced PCPG outreach to highlight Veteran and family member eligibility and to encourage PCPG benefits usage multiple times across their military to civilian and/or career lifespan for as long as they remain eligible. In FY 2021, 5,126 total beneficiaries were found eligible and referred to PCPG Contract Counselors. In addition, 2,801 of these beneficiaries have completed PCPG services.

Through this enhanced benefit, eligible participants are empowered to reach their educational and career goals through personalized education and career guidance. Due to COVID-19, PCPG approved the use of tele-counseling by contractors. This change allows for the continuation of services and expansion to beneficiaries who reside overseas, ensuring overall program success. Beneficiaries have reported satisfaction with receiving PCPG benefits via tele-counseling; therefore, VA is currently updating program policy to include the option of tele-counseling in the future.

Wellness Wednesday Financial Education

Financial stress has been identified as a risk factor for suicide, which is why financial literacy is an important aspect of improving financial health for TSMs, Veterans, spouses and their families. The Wellness Wednesday Financial Education series addresses the financial questions of the Veteran community and created a platform for financial literacy. In 2020, VA and Prudential Financial (Prudential) entered into a public/private partnership via a Memorandum of Agreement to provide financial literacy and wellness to participants. Prudential agreed to gift financial literacy classes on the third Wednesday of every month at no charge to VA or the Veteran. As of March 16, 2022, 1 year and 29 classes later, 7,571 registrants have signed up to attend classes that range from "Women and Money" to "Budgeting & Building an Emergency Fund" and "Transition Successfully into Retirement." Attendees have reported a 96.4% overall satisfaction rate with the classes. In April 2022, VBA hosted financial literacy classes in recognition of the National Financial Literacy Month. In collaboration with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, Consumer Financial Protection Bureau and B.C. Holdings of Tennessee (a private non-profit educational company), and in conjunction with Prudential, VA provides free classes to Veterans that discuss investing in the digital age, how to stop living paycheck

to paycheck, Social Security information, understanding credit and credit scores and how to avoid scams and fraud. As the financial literacy program continues to grow, VBA is seeking to increase financial literacy offerings through public/private partnerships with other companies.

Outreach

VBA engages in a variety of outreach activities designed to identify and remove potential barriers and ensure consistent delivery of benefits to the Veteran community. In FY 2021, VBA represented the Department at over 6,700 events, reaching nearly 274,000 Service members, Veterans, family members and survivors. Additionally, VBA enhanced its efforts to reach vulnerable Veterans to educate and empower them about the benefits, services and resources available to support them in the mental health and suicide prevention space. In FY 2022 to date, VBA has hosted, collaborated in and/or supported 19 mental health/suicide prevention outreach events. These events have reached a total of 4,650 Veterans and resulted in 290 direct engagements with Veterans seeking information about mental health awareness and suicide prevention. VBA continues to support Veterans in the absence of face-to-face interactions during the pandemic as virtual outreach continues to thrive and allows for an alternative method to connect with the Veteran community.

In addition to conducting direct outreach to Veterans, family members, caregivers and survivors, VA recognizes the importance of educational training opportunities for our staff. All VA staff are required to complete annual VA Signs, Ask, Validate, Encourage/Expedite (S.A.V.E.) Training, which provides information to VA employees about how to prevent suicide among Veterans. Furthermore, VBA hosted a virtual Suicide Prevention Crisis Response Training in March 2022, which was attended by over 1,400 VA staff members. This enhanced training provided suicide prevention basics, real-time examples/scenarios and knowledge on how to make a warm transfer to the Veterans Crisis Line. Guest speakers educated and empowered attendees on how to recognize a mental health emergency and get at-risk individuals the help they need.

Conclusion

VA shares Congress' goal of reducing military and Veteran suicide by addressing the full range of risk and protective factors, including economic risk factors and supporting connectedness. VA continues to work to achieve this goal and serves as a resource regarding all benefits and services furnished by the Department to transitioning Service members, Veterans, their families, survivors and caregivers.

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore, this concludes my testimony. I am happy to respond to any questions you or the Committee may have.