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House of Representatives

One is Too Many; 20 a Day is a Crisis

Mr. Speaker, I rise today to mark Suicide Prevention Month and to join with my colleagues in helping to raise awareness of—and combat—the staggering rate of suicide among our veteran population.

The men and women of our military make tremendous, selfless sacrifices on behalf of each and every American. As a result, many veterans return from service with physical and/or invisible wounds and a disturbingly high number are taking their own lives.

In July, the VA released the most comprehensive study analyzing suicide among our veteran population to date, reviewing 55 million veterans' records since 1979. It showed that every day an estimated 20 veterans commit suicide. This number is tragic beyond words, unacceptable and numbing.

Mr. Speaker, we are in the midst of what can only be described as a staggering mental health crisis costing the lives of 20 of our nation's heroes every day. Too many veterans are being left behind and too many families are left with the pain and anguish of losing a loved one. Often times, family members witness the veteran struggling but the VA refuses to take their observations into account.

As the son of a WW2 combat veteran, I have witnessed the residual wounds of war, the struggle to cope with the post-traumatic stress that can continue for decades and the pain that a lack of access to services can cause for veterans and their families.

This Congress, we have passed legislation to give the VA additional tools and give veterans key support, including the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act (P.L. 114-2), which targeted the gaps in the VA's mental health and suicide prevention efforts; and the Female Veteran Suicide Prevention Act (P.L. 114-188), which is intended to prod the VA to take into account the complex causes and factors that are driving the disproportionately high suicide rate

among women veterans and use that information when designing suicide prevention programs.

The Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act (P.L. 114-198) included provisions to direct the VA to take several actions to expand opioid safety initiatives that help prevent veterans from becoming opioid abusers. As a recent Frontline investigation entitled "Chasing Heroin" summarized: "Veterans face a double-edged threat: Untreated chronic pain can increase the risk of suicide, but poorly managed opioid regimens can also be fatal."

The VA must do better: they cannot simply dole out drugs, as we saw in Tomah. It is a dereliction of duty for VA medical staff charged with the sacred task of caring for our nation's veterans and this law will help ensure proper management and controls are in place when the VA treats a veteran's chronic pain.

The VA does have a number of suicide prevention programs that can be a resource for veterans, servicemembers, their families and loved ones, including and especially the Veterans Crisis Hotline. Any veteran in danger of self-harm or suicide can call, 24 hours a day. It is anonymous and confidential. It is staffed by trained professionals who will "work with you to reduce the immediate risk, help you get through the crisis, make sure you are safe, and help you to connect with the right services."

We have an obligation to repay the debt we owe to those who have fought in defense of our nation and a sacred duty to ensure that we do everything in our power to get our vets the physical and psychological support they need.

This year's Suicide Prevention Month theme is 'Be There.' During the darkest hours in our history, the men and women who serve in uniform have always been there to answer the call. We can and must do better to be there for them.