

Chairmen, Ranking Members, and distinguished members of the House and Senate Committees on Veterans Affairs, I am honored to speak to you on behalf of AMVETS and present our legislative priorities for this year.

We thank you and your staff for your time, efforts, and attention throughout the 118th Congress. Having caring staff, many of them veterans, working with us to solve complex challenges facing our community makes a significant difference.

AMVETS has consistently presented veteran suicide as our top priority for *six years*, yet rates continue to rise, as evidenced by VA data. Repeated declarations that "enough is enough" fall short of prompting real change. Our veterans, their families, and communities suffer as a result of this inaction and lack of urgency. We implore Congress to truly embrace innovative solutions to significantly reduce these numbers.

The \$16 billion currently funneled into existing programs has proven ineffective in combating veteran suicide. Echoing the Journal of American Medical Association's recommendations from eight years ago, AMVETS believes that exploring new and novel approaches is imperative. We commend the recent funding of innovative non-profits through grants and urge the VA to closely examine these programs' successes for potential scaling.

However, investment in these innovative efforts remains insufficient. In sectors like pharmaceuticals and biotechnology, R&D investment is often 10 to 15 % of revenue. At the VA funding for innovative alternative approaches represents about 1% of the VA mental health budget.

AMVETS proposes that the VA allocate 10% of its mental health budget to establish a new program aimed at enhancing the mental wellness of transitioning servicemembers. This program should focus

on preemptive measures to maintain physical and mental readiness and adopt positive strategies for trauma management to lower the risk of future suicides.

Additionally, we recommend increasing the funding for non-profit grants to 5% of the VA's mental health budget. This increase would bolster the VA's capacity to identify and expand upon effective interventions, potentially reducing veteran suicide rates significantly.

We recognize the shared concern for veteran welfare among the members of Congress and appreciate your past support. Yet, we urge you to channel your empathy into action that transcends bureaucratic interests and prioritizes veterans' well-being. Without a shift towards a more proactive and innovative approach, we risk losing another 36,000 veterans to suicide. AMVETS calls for a renewed, urgent commitment to saving lives and ensuring veterans lead fulfilling lives.

AMVETS has many other priorities for this Congress, including passing the Major Richard Star Act and increasing the dependency and indemnity compensation for our military survivors. Our survivors should also not be punished for choosing to remarry, and we encourage all of you to support the Love Lives On Act.

AMVETS and others are advocating for legislation to allow all congressionally chartered veteran nonprofits to receive tax-deductible donations. Currently, if organizations like AMVETS allow honorably discharged non-wartime era veterans to become members, we can no longer receive tax-deductible gifts, which I am sure you all agree just doesn't make sense.

The VSO Equal Tax Treatment Act rectifies this issue. We are grateful to Congressmen Wenstrup and Panetta, for their advocacy in getting this legislation passed out of the Ways and Means Committee.

We also ask Congress to oversee and support the successful completion of the Electronic Healthcare Record at VA facilities so our veterans receive the modernized care they deserve. We need all hands on deck here. Failure is not an option, and the days of this being a political football need to end.

Despite significantly increasing funds for ineffective mental health models at the VA, urgent attention is needed for optometry, the 3rd most used specialty. Optometrists, delivering over 70% of VA's eyecare, face low pay and political challenges to their scope of practice. Poor conditions deter recruitment and retention, driving optometrists away and making the VA an employer of last resort. Consequently, the VA risks incurring higher costs through community care, against veterans' preferences.

By working together, we can ensure that our veterans receive the care, recognition, and opportunities they deserve, laying a strong

foundation for a more resilient and supportive society for all who have served. Thank you, and I look forward to answering your questions.