



STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD
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SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
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Chairman Isakson and Ranking Member Tester, on behalf of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), I am pleased to offer our organization's strong support for the *Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019 (S. 785)*. NAMI urges this Committee to advance this important bipartisan effort to reduce veteran suicide and improve mental health outcomes through expanded access to care, better diagnostic tools, and increased oversight of U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) programs.

NAMI is the nation's largest grassroots mental health organization, dedicated to building better lives for the millions of Americans affected by mental illness. NAMI envisions a world where all people affected by mental illness experience resiliency, recovery, and wellness.

NAMI commends both you, Senator Tester, and your colleague Senator Moran for introducing S. 785. We are proud to join you in celebrating the legacy of retired Navy SEAL Commander John Scott Hannon, who served for 23 years and fought a courageous battle with post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injury, and bipolar disorder. CDR Hannon embodies the strength of veterans living with mental health conditions, and this bill exemplifies his passion and efforts to improve access to veterans' mental health care as a member of NAMI Montana.

NAMI is proud to have worked with a bipartisan group of legislators on key components of the bill, including increasing access and continuity of care for veterans in need of coordinated support. NAMI advocates for improving mental health and brain condition diagnostics because an accurate, quick, and early diagnosis has the potential to save countless lives and is a critical step to effective care. We are dedicated to working with the VA, legislators, and researchers to improve the process and get veterans the treatment and care they need for their recovery.

As NAMI Montana Executive Director Matt Kuntz has noted about his friend CDR Hannon, "He was a long-time mental health advocate for America's veterans and believed strongly that the VA mental health care system, like every system, needs to take concrete steps to improve its ability to conduct its mission." This bill is a tangible step in the right direction to ensure that every veteran has the right care available to them at the right time.

S. 785 seeks to improve veterans' mental health outcomes by increasing veterans' access to mental health care, particularly during transition, supporting innovative suicide prevention

initiatives, launching programs and studies on mental health, increasing oversight of VA's mental health care and suicide prevention efforts, and enhancing VA's medical workforce and telehealth services. This legislation builds upon the President's Executive Order Number 13822 and recommendations from mental health organizations, Veterans Service Organizations, the U.S. Government Accountability Office, and VA Advisory Committees.

This bill aims to make improvements to VA mental health care that will have a lasting effect on the future of the diagnosis and treatment for mental health conditions. Among the many important provisions in this bill, NAMI is particularly grateful for the inclusion of the following in S. 785:

- Extending VA health care eligibility to veterans for a full year after transitioning from the Armed Forces and requiring the promotion of this eligibility during the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and on VA's website.
- Directing the VA to conduct a computerized Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) program as a supplement to VA mental health care and carry out a study of veterans living at high altitudes who might be at an increased risk for dying by suicide.
- Creating the *Precision Medicine for Veterans Initiative*, modeled after the National Institutes of Health's All of Us program, in order to identify and validate brain and mental health biomarkers, with a focus on post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, depression, and severe anxiety disorders.
- Directing the GAO to conduct a management review of the Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, report on how VA manages patients at high-risk for suicide, and report on the effectiveness of VA's efforts to integrate mental health care into a primary care setting, both within VA and between VA and community-based providers.
- Providing \$10 million in funding to increase the number of locations for VA telehealth care.

Mr. Chairman, NAMI is grateful to this Committee for the continued focus on ending veteran suicide and improving the lives and care of America's veterans. We wish to express our gratitude to the Committee for the invitation to submit a statement for the record on S. 785. It is a devastating tragedy that our nation continues to lose an average of 20 veterans each day to suicide. We continue to commit our organization to working shoulder-to-shoulder with Congress, VA, the Department of Defense, and our advocacy partners to achieve our shared goal of the reduction, and eventual elimination, of suicide among veterans in America.

NAMI congratulates Senators Tester and Moran for bringing forward this important legislation. We urge swift passage of S. 785 to improve mental health care among our nation's veterans and advance the important cause of suicide prevention.