



STATEMENT

of the

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)

for the Record

U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

On Pending Legislation: S. 2210, the *Veteran Partners' Efforts to Enhance Reintegration (PEER) Act*

**Written Testimony Submitted by: Mary Giliberti, J.D.
Chief Executive Officer
NAMI, National Alliance on Mental Illness**

June 29, 2016

Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for affording NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness the opportunity to submit written testimony about the importance of peer support as an integral part to veterans' aligned care teams at VA medical centers.

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 has over 900 affiliates and more than 200,000 grassroots leaders and advocates across the United States—all committed to raising awareness and building a community of hope for all of those in need, including our men and women in uniform, veterans, and military families.

S. 2210, the *Veteran Partner's Efforts to Enhance Reintegration (PEER) Act*

Ensuring veterans not only have increased access to mental health care, but access to *high-quality and effective care* is imperative. An important part of a veteran's decision to initially seek and stay active in treatment involves a level of cultural competency on the part of the provider. As the Interagency Task Force on Military and Veterans Mental Health noted "...many veterans are willing to seek treatment and share their experiences when they share a common bond of duty, honor, and service with the provider."

Our men and women who have served can face extraordinary challenges from their experiences, and as a result require specialized treatment environments that are understanding and judgement-free. Therefore, NAMI strongly supports S. 2210, the *Veteran Partners' Efforts to Enhance Reintegration (PEER) Act*, sponsored by Senator Blumenthal. NAMI believes that the addition of peer specialists to patient aligned care teams is a positive step for VA health centers to increase the capacity of focused support available to veterans, while integrating mental health services more seamlessly within primary care settings.

It is critical to underscore that a peer support specialist is an important member of a clinical care team, which should also include an appropriate array of qualified health and mental health care professionals.

Peer support is an important treatment tool that promotes mental wellness, reduces the stigma on seeking care, and empowers veterans by improving coping skills and overall quality of life. Additionally, peer support is specifically beneficial to the veterans' community for addressing concerns including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), combat and operational stress, traumatic brain injury (TBI), and military sexual trauma (MST).

Invisible Wounds

As the Committee is well aware, the signature wounds of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars are invisible. In a culture that demands strength, it is often difficult to step forward and seek help for an injury that remains unseen. For this reason, there is a larger barrier facing America's veterans in accessing necessary mental health care services.

Peer support often serves as a bridge to receiving treatment and is a positive first step. As highlighted previously but cannot be underscored enough, cultural competence is key in establishing trust with a veteran, and peer support is often the best tool for this purpose.

Rural Veterans

NAMI appreciates that specific considerations have been made in S. 2210 concerning access to peer support services for rural veterans. Requiring the Secretary to make facility determinations with the mental health care needs of rural veterans in mind, helps ensure that this underserved subset of the veterans' population receives better access to care.

Women Veterans

NAMI is pleased that S. 2210 contains a specific provision on service considerations for female veterans. As the Committee is aware, the fastest growing population within the veteran community is women. It is time for VA and the nation to fully recognize the ways women have contributed to the military overall, and specifically in the most recent conflicts. Although female service members have found themselves in combat over the past 14 years in Iraq and Afghanistan, women are starting to play an even larger role in direct combat positions. With the repeal of the ban on combat jobs for women by Secretary Ash Carter in late 2015, three female soldiers earning the U.S. Army's coveted Ranger tab, and the recent appointment of the first female Combatant Commander—women veterans, now more than ever need equivalent health care services from VA.

Female veterans are six times more likely than the overall civilian population to be at risk for suicide, and twice as likely as their male veteran counterparts to develop PTSD. Considering these disturbing facts, coupled with the knowledge that female veterans are at a significantly higher risk of experiencing sexual assault from their time in service—it is essential that specialized mental health services be expanded for women. NAMI believes increased peer support is a vital tool for female veterans on their path to recovery and mental wellness.

Suicide Prevention

As we are all aware, 22 veterans commit suicide every day—this alarming figure has been a national tragedy for far too long. While the addition of peer support services cannot harm national efforts to reduce the number of suicides in the veterans' community, NAMI wants to be clear that these services have not yet proven fidelity for suicide prevention.

Accordingly, NAMI advises the Committee to consider requesting a research study led by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) in coordination with VA, on the effect peer support services have on suicide-specific outcomes such as suicidal ideation, attempts, and overall reduction in suicide death.

NAMI is grateful to the Chairman, Ranking Member, and the entire Committee for its commitment to improving mental health services for our nation's veterans. Further, NAMI is committed to working with Congress, VA, and Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) in addressing these growing mental health concerns—ensuring that veterans, too have a community of hope and realize that recovery is achievable.

Thank you for inviting NAMI to submit written testimony on this important bill; we always appreciate being a resource on mental health issues in the veterans' community.