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March 12, 2021

The Honorable Denis R. McDonough
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough,

As the COVID-19 pandemic stretches on, veterans and their families are facing a variety of challenges. Many have faced job and income losses, barriers to accessing health care and child care, social isolation, illness, and the loss of loved ones. The COVID-19 public health and economic crisis has created new mental health concerns for many, and exacerbated the conditions faced by those already suffering from mental illness. As of January 2021, about 40 percent of American adults have reported symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder, up from about 10 percent of adults who reported these symptoms from January to June 2019, according to a study by the [Kaiser Family Foundation](#). There is even greater need for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to take swift action to implement Public Law 116-171, the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act (the Hannon Act).

The impact of the pandemic on mental health in the U.S. is particularly worrisome for veterans. Veterans are more likely to have mental health challenges than their peers, and more than 6,000 veterans die by suicide annually. A [September 2020 study](#) of post-9/11 veterans by the Wounded Warrior Project found that approximately 60 percent of veterans reported feeling disconnected from their family, friends, or community, and half of veterans said their mental and physical health has worsened since the onset of social distancing. Further, 30 percent of veterans reported having suicidal thoughts in the past two weeks and almost the same amount said they are having difficulty accessing mental health care.

With an already unacceptably high veteran suicide rate, the pandemic has only compounded the need for swift action to better meet veterans' mental health needs. The Department must move quickly to implement the lifesaving provisions of the Hannon Act. We were proud to work across the aisle to develop this comprehensive veteran suicide prevention legislation, which was signed into law last fall, and now it is up to VA to implement the law as Congress intended.

Named for a Montana veteran who lost his life to the invisible wounds of war, the Hannon Act is designed to bolster VA's mental health workforce, increase rural veterans' access to care, expand veterans' access to alternative and local treatment options, improve coordination with the Department of Defense, and conduct veteran suicide prevention research and oversight.

Released last fall, the VA 2020 National Suicide Prevention Annual Report showed no decrease in the veteran suicide rate between 2017 and 2018 – more than 17 veterans continue to die by suicide each day, on average. However, there were reductions in the suicide rate among veterans who used VA health care. If the Hannon Act is expediently implemented, veterans across the nation would have improved access to high-quality mental health care and we could have fewer veterans lost to suicide.

The law contains important provisions such as requiring every VA Medical Center to employ a suicide prevention coordinator, expanding veterans' telehealth options for mental health care, expansion of VA's mental health workforce through a scholarship program, new mental health research that builds on the VA's Million Veteran Program, and a community grant program for improved collaboration between VA and veteran-serving local organizations. We appreciate your recent public comments on the Hannon Act, and we ask for your collaboration on the implementation of the Vet Center scholarship program and community grant program in particular. We urge you to remain focused on utilizing the tools Congress has provided to help improve mental health outcomes for our nation's veterans.

Too many veterans are lost to suicide each year, and the COVID-19 pandemic threatens to worsen mental health conditions for veterans. In your new role as VA Secretary, we implore you to take decisive action to bolster the Department's mental health care options for veterans through the expedited implementation of the Hannon Act. We need to help veterans get through this crisis and build the Department's suicide prevention efforts for the years to come.

Sincerely,



Jon Tester
Chairman
Committee on Veterans' Affairs



Jerry Moran
Ranking Member
Committee on Veterans' Affairs