

**Cheryl Magee-Baker: Representative of Hope Center**

Before the United States Senate

Presented to: The Honorable Senator Bill Cassidy, M.D.

Subject: Impact of the SSG Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program

Date: August 14, 2025

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Good morning, Senator Cassidy and members of the committee. I'm honored to represent **Hope Center**, a faith-based organization headquartered in Gretna, Louisiana, an outreach ministry of The Hope of Glory Church under the leadership of Dr. W. Ron Walker, President. I'm here today to speak about the life-saving work we've done under the **SSG Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program and the Supportive Services for Veteran Families Program (SSVF)**, and our unwavering commitment to the Veterans and military families who call Louisiana home.

Let me begin with a truth we all know too well: **suicide among Veterans is a public health crisis**—and for too long, too many have slipped through the cracks. But I'm proud to say that in our corner of the country, we're doing something about it. The work of suicide prevention and ending homelessness provide an opportunity to reach Veterans and their families with help and hope.

At Hope Center, we've touched the lives of **123 Veterans and service members** through SSG Fox grant program. And not one—**not a single one**—has been lost to suicide. That is the impact of timely outreach, culturally competent care, and deep-rooted community trust. On the side of addressing homelessness among Veterans, we have served in our last 13 years over 5425 households. The work is not easy, and we need to recognize, as we do this work, that we must address mental health concerns and move from just being trauma-informed care to healing-centered engagement to see the best possible outcomes.

Over the past year, we've conducted outreach across **six parishes**, hosting events, walking into libraries, churches, barber shops, and coastal communities where Veterans live in isolation—some disconnected from the VA, others never enrolled at all. Through these grassroots efforts, we've engaged over **534 Veterans and service members**—many of them for the very first time.

We've **connected 26 individuals to the VA who had never accessed their earned benefits**, and **re-engaged 42 more who were on the rolls but not utilizing VA healthcare**. These are men and women who served our country with honor but carried their battles home in silence.

And silence, Senator, can be deadly. The stigma of admitting suicidal thoughts keeps many from speaking openly—even when they come to us asking for help. We've seen Veterans on suicide watch unable to check a box on a form, but what they really need is someone to sit down, look them in the eye, and say, "You matter. We're not going anywhere."

That's the heart of what we do.

Our **Peer Support Specialists—Veterans themselves—offer more than services. They offer hope.** They host healing circles. They walk into someone's living room at 6 p.m. on a Friday. They host the *Still Standing Podcast*, where listeners hear real stories from real people who've walked through the darkness and come out the other side.

We've built partnerships with the **VA Suicide Prevention team**, meeting weekly to coordinate care **Veteran**. We are training faith-based organizations to open **Veteran Welcome Centers** in their churches. And we've launched **mini retreats**, where families come together to reconnect and begin to heal.

This work isn't glamorous—but it's sacred.

It's the mother who called and said, *"You saved my son's life."*

It's the Veteran who said, *"I didn't know how close I was to the edge until someone pulled me back."*

Senator Cassidy, we are grateful for your leadership on mental health and your commitment to suicide prevention in Louisiana and across the nation. But there is more to be done. The leadership teams at SSG Fox and SSVF National Offices have listened to what we are seeing on the ground and made adjustments as they can within regulations. What needs to change is that SSG Fox Veterans and Service Members should not have to say I am suicidal to gain the array of services that the program can offer, but the fact that they reached out for help and hope should be sufficient. In Louisiana, we need to form a statewide and local coalition of providers and local governmental agencies to develop a seamless network to address mental health concerns and suicide prevention efforts. We need funding and support to build the coalition, establish a response team, and launch a campaign to destigmatize asking for help. We urge the committee to support and advocate to **continue and expand the SSG Fox Grant Program and SSVF Program**, to fund local, trusted organizations who are on the ground, in the communities, doing this critical work. Secretary Allen also needs to include in the focus for the SSG Fox SPGP not only the focus on connecting Veterans who never access VA services, but also to include in that focus Veterans who are on the rolls but don't utilize VA services, to reengage with the critical help and services that the VA provides. Veterans often cite the disconnection as stemming from the lengthy wait and arduous process, which exacerbates the issue, leading many to leave without receiving any help. Hope Center has dedicated staff who will assist in making appointments and spending lots of time to get appointments for both mental health care and physical healthcare. We are pleased to say that through the implementation of the SSG Fox program we have a point of contact to escalate Veterans in getting appointments and mental health crisis teams get to Veterans quickly and also the implementation of Veterans being able to walk in during a crisis as SSG Fox provides support for transportation is working but it is only the beginning.

Because when we show up with empathy, when we provide real resources, and when we lead with dignity, we save lives.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. And thank you for standing with us—and with every Veteran who deserves to not just survive, but truly live.

