

**** OPENING STATEMENT ****

- I appreciate the opportunity to highlight the significance of the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act that was introduced by myself and the Chairman more than a year ago.
- This bill, named for a former Navy Seal who served our nation honorably for 23 years, would expand and improve the services available for veterans struggling with the invisible wounds of war.
- After serving in combat, Scott returned to Helena, Montana. He was open about his journey to recovery, getting involved in the Montana chapter of the National Alliance for Mental Illness and animal therapy programs at Montana Wild.
- He died by suicide on February 25, 2018.
- This bill honors his legacy by supporting the types of programs that improved Commander Hannon's quality of life. And by expanding our understanding of mental health conditions and their treatments, which may have made diagnosing his conditions easier.
- There are a lot of important provisions in this bill. It represents compromise in a time when compromises are hard to come by.

- This legislation requires all VA hospitals to employ at least one Suicide Prevention Coordinator.
- It bolsters VA's research efforts – particularly in identifying and validating brain and mental health biomarkers and studying the effects of high altitude on mental health and risk of suicide.
- It provides the tools for effective VA suicide prevention and mental health outreach efforts.
- It helps expand rural veterans' access to VA telehealth care.
- It requires VA to take a hard look at its mental health professional staffing levels.
- It directs VA to establish a scholarship program for students pursuing a degree in psychology, social work, marriage and family therapy, or mental health counseling. Those students would enter into an agreement to work full-time at a Vet Center for a period of time following completion of their program of study.
- It would allow VA to award grants to community organizations to provide suicide prevention services to veterans and their families.
- And as part of this grant, veterans will be able to receive necessary emergency care when they are in crisis.

- And, if they need ongoing care, they can get that care at the VA.
- I encourage my colleagues in the House to support the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act so we can move this bill forward. And as the Chairman has indicated, we are ready and eager to work with our House counterparts to advance additional legislation that could improve health outcomes for veterans.
- Our work can send a very important message – not only to veterans but to the American public – that we can come together during politically turbulent times to do what’s right. In this case, to provide critical support to those who have sacrificed so much on our behalf, and to connect more of them to the life-saving mental health care they need.
- In particular I want to thank the Hannon family for continuing to be a partner in this effort to improve the services available to veterans who need some help in improving their mental health. And I’d like to recognize a witness from Montana, Matt Kuntz, who remains very close to the Hannon family and whose tireless advocacy helped make this legislation possible.
- And thank you again, Mr. Chairman. It’s been a pleasure working with you and I appreciate your dedication to getting things done.