

## **\*\* OPENING STATEMENT \*\***

- Good afternoon. And thank you to the Veterans Service Organizations, as well as the Department of Defense and Veterans Affairs officials with us today.
- Many of our men and women in uniform face isolation and mental health challenges when they return home from their service.
- And more than a year into this pandemic, we now know veterans across the country are experiencing mental health concerns at higher rates than ever.
- That's why it's important that we gather today to talk about the challenges veterans have faced accessing mental health care during the pandemic.
- And to hear from VA and DoD about what they're doing to address those concerns.
- I want to commend VA for its use of telehealth services and its quick shift to virtual operations for the Veterans Crisis Line as the virus took hold of the nation.
- As we all know, the effects of this pandemic are far from over, and the number of veterans who die by suicide remains unacceptably high.
- That's why it's even more critical that VA and DoD take swift action to implement the Commander John Scott Hannon Act, my bipartisan bill with Ranking Member Moran that was signed into law last fall.

- Named after a former Navy SEAL and Montanan - Commander John Scott Hannon - this law honors his legacy, and reaffirms our commitment to those who have selflessly served, by taking aggressive action to improve access to mental health care.
- The Hannon Act combines some of the best ideas from veterans, VSOs, VA, and mental health professionals to improve veterans' access to mental health care.
- It does so through strengthened telehealth and alternate therapies, better connections to care in the community, research on evidence-based treatments, and accountability for VA's management of suicide prevention resources.
- It also provides more local and complementary health care options –which brought Commander Hannon comfort back in Montana, by working in nature and with other veterans.
- And, it bolsters VA's mental health workforce through a scholarship program to get more mental health professionals into our Vet Centers.
- There is no time to waste in implementing the important provisions in the Hannon Act, and I know Senator Moran and Members of this committee share this important goal.
- Further, the transition from servicemember to veteran can also be a tough time for many.

- That's why I think it's essential to have the DoD take part in these conversations as well.
- They have important responsibility, shared with VA, to implement the Hannon Act and improve the transition experience, make connections to mental health resources, and contribute to joint VA-DOD mental health programming.
- We need to continue to reduce the stigma of accessing mental health care, making sure our vets have every option available to them.
- I would like to thank all of you here today for your commitment to bettering the health and wellbeing of our servicemen and women, veterans, and their families.