

**** OPENING STATEMENT ****

- Thank you, Mr. Chairman.
- We are here today because suicide is a national public health crisis. In different ways, it has impacted nearly every one of us in this room. And as many as 20 veterans die each and every day by suicide. 20.
- Stop and think about that number. And think of folks like Commander John Scott Hannon – a Montanan and former Navy Seal.
- After returning from war, Scott rescued and rehabilitated wild animals with Montana Wild. He worked with at-risk youth with Habitat for Humanity, and with the Prickly Pear Land Trust to help veterans access nature trails.
- He was open about his mental health challenges. In fact, he was involved with the Montana Chapter of NAMI (the National Alliance for Mental Illness), and was passionate about improving veterans' access to mental health care.
- This man mattered. He defended lives while fighting our nation's enemies. And he dedicated himself to improving lives when he returned. Tragically, he ended his own life on February 25, 2018.
- We need to reflect on folks like Scott Hannon before we start patting ourselves for a job well done.
- The job is far from done. And what we've done isn't nearly enough.
- VA needs to do more. Congress needs to do more. Everyone needs to do more.
- That is not a criticism. It is a reality that needs to be acknowledged if we are going to tackle this crisis together.
- And ultimately, VA **must** play the central role in combating this crisis and coordinating veteran care.
- We need a tip of the spear – someone who can be held accountable for these joint efforts moving forward.
- You, Secretary Wilkie, are that person.
- I am pleased that you recently convened a meeting of the task force created by the President's PREVENTS Initiative.

- I hope you continue to bring relevant stakeholders to the table for productive discussions that lead to results.
- The challenges are daunting, and addressing the complex needs of a diverse veterans population will require a great deal of focus, energy and creativity.
- Women veterans are dying by suicide at nearly twice the rate of civilian women – but no one can definitely say why.
- Former members of the National Guard and Reserve **who have never activated** represent as estimated 15 percent of former service members who die by suicide – yet they lack access to many VA services.
- And veterans with other-than-honorable discharges – many who were discharged because of behavior stemming from an underlying mental health condition – need consistent outreach and access to VA services.
- As you know, Senator Moran and I and several colleagues have introduced the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act.
- This legislation would improve VA’s mental health services and ensure veterans have access to both the traditional and complementary mental health care they need.
- Mr. Secretary, I need your help and support on this bill. It tracks closely with everything you said in your testimony, and with what we have discussed in person.
- In states like Montana – which VA recently identified as the most underserved VA system in the country for mental health – there is a lot of work to do.
- We know VA provides some of the best mental health care in the country. The problem is that many veterans don’t know that or there are often no mental health providers on the ground to provide that care.
- I would like to see VA increase and improve its outreach, expand its telehealth access, and do a better job of recruiting and retaining mental health providers.
- I applaud the VA ATLAS Initiative for working with the VFW Post in Eureka to set up a telehealth hub less than 10 miles from the high line in Montana.
- Coordinating with outside partners can often make a tremendous difference, and I look forward to hearing from the community partners on the second panel. You deserve a seat at the table because your voice is important.
- I would also like to thank Major General Matt Quinn from the Montana National Guard.

- The Montana National Guard has been doing some great work partnering with the State of Montana to extend assistance and services to members of the Guard.
- General Quinn's efforts are a great example of local stakeholders coming together and finding a solution that makes a difference in the lives of our troops and veterans.
- I look forward to our discussion today.
- Mr. Secretary, thank you again for being here.