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**Hope For The Warriors statement to the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Re: Harnessing the Power of Community: Leveraging Networks to Tackle Suicide**

Veteran suicide is a tragic reality and has become an oft-cited data point; the reality is that clearly defined predictors are difficult to catalogue as part of a logical equation where the sum of all factors leads to another self-inflicted veteran death. HOPE appreciates the Committee recognizing the power of community to enhance veteran wellness. Our experience supporting post-9/11 service members, veterans and military families for the last 13 years provides a window into the myriad issues that veterans and their families deal with, and oftentimes struggle with.

Hope For The Warriors (HOPE) knows that the opportunity to instill resilience starts at a young age at home, but can be impacted by an individual's engagement with society, military service, and community. Therefore, we all — the VA, the Department of Defense, community organizations, and care providers — have an obligation to ensure military family wellness is a priority at every level — individual, community, state, and national - through continuous collaborative communication with each other.

About Hope For The Warriors

The mission of Hope For The Warriors is to restore self, family and hope to the warrior communities we serve — service members, veterans, military families, caregivers and families of the fallen. It's more than a mission, however; it's who we are. HOPE was founded by military families aboard Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, in 2006, as we felt the effects of war on our friends, colleagues, families and ourselves. What began as post-combat bedside care and support has evolved to a national organization that has adapted to ongoing changes within the military community. We stayed the course with our country's post-9/11 veteran population as physical wounds healed, but emotional wounds still needed care. We recognize that there are many factors aside from combat that can contribute to mental health, including trauma from life events not directly associated with service. We've opened our arms to those who seek hope.

Our work today is still just as individualized and community-based as it was in HOPE's earliest years. We provide more than 12,000 services to over 4,200 military families in all 50 states annually. We believe warriors can thrive with access to integrated services focused on their individual and collective well-being. We recognize every service member and military family has their own goals and needs, and ideal resources do not always exist in their communities. We will restore SELF, FAMILY and HOPE through our national services, virtual capabilities and partners in mission.

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Note: Hope For The Warriors President and CEO Robin Kelleher is also a co-founder of the organization.

Lead factors to veteran crisis and risk for suicide

Isolation and a feeling of detachment are two of the primary causal factors in a person's ultimate decision to choose suicide. Military service members are, by definition, trained to succeed in the unrelenting environment that is combat. Very often, disconnecting from one's own emotions is critical in order to execute the physical and mental requirements of combat operations. "Compartmentalization" is a by-product of the DoD's training skillset but the consequences of the last 18 years of continuous global combat operations has resulted in the current crisis of psychological health issues. Isolation is further compounded by an increasing disconnectedness from foundational belief systems, family, faith, and identity, all leading to a feeling of hopelessness.

How communities provide suicide prevention resources to veterans

The military unit is a service member's first "community organization", therefore the important aspects of *community* that the VA, veteran organizations and this Committee recognize as a critical power to harness must begin at the start of military service, and continue in a collaborative ecosystem of supporting organizations.

Military service is connected to a belief system. We shouldn't ignore faith, patriotism, moral obligation and legacy of service as important conduits to the feeling of a greater purpose. In a society where there are groups actively attacking spirituality, the National Anthem and our country's flag, it's easy to see how a veteran who answered a greater calling can feel isolated. Community combats isolation, and our job is to reconnect veterans to supportive communities. We must view communities in a broader scope to maintain the necessary constant connection. It's not just what is found in one's neighborhood; it's tapping in to virtual resources, social media, veteran-based programming and promoting military cultural awareness in existing community resources, like houses of faith and special interest groups. HOPE activates each of these communities to carry out integrated case management.

How the VA can leverage community resources

Sustainable care for the veteran population doesn't reside in one place, rather it exists in a network of support that surrounds an individual. The VA must function within a comprehensive system of strategic relationships with the Department of Defense, veteran and military service organizations and other community groups, to ensure ongoing, sustainable, individualized care for the veteran population. The first step in building emotional/psychological fitness MUST become part of the DoD/military training programs.



Building resiliency...and the methods and modalities to ensure it's sustained and maintained...needs to begin while a service member is still in uniform. There should be a clear handoff from DoD to VA and veteran community organizations to ensure continuity of care. Organizations like Hope For The Warriors that emphasize a veteran's holistic well-being, and includes his or her family in the healing journey, open access to the communities he or she needs for life-long support and resiliency.

Hope For The Warriors' efforts to reduce suicide in the veteran community

Hope For The Warriors has built programs that address the known risk factors associated with military suicide, specifically disconnection and isolation. Our programs are designed to restore connection to self, family and most importantly, Hope. Our programs build emotional strength, resiliency, purpose and sustainable coping skills that are all necessary to combat isolation and detachment, thereby keeping the *thought* of suicide from becoming the *act*.

Our greatest tool is community connection, through virtual workshops, meaningful events, military family-based programming and a strong referral system to like partners in mission. Collaboration is necessary to create an environment where everywhere a veteran looks, he or she sees Hope.

Additionally, Hope utilizes innovative techniques to identify wellness risk factors, propensity for risk behaviors, etc. Artificial Intelligence is actively used across businesses to increase performance and "drill down" into human factors of their customers – veteran support networks must be just as innovative.

Our dedication to mental health services includes the entire military family. We thrive on connecting veterans and families to communities of support in order to bridge the gap of understanding between military and civilians. Our constant is a message of Hope.

How community organizations collect/use data for community-based veteran suicide prevention

Suicide provides definitive data, only captured after it's too late, so we must work together in tracking trends among an ever-changing veteran population. Basic demographic information, health trends and regional data from the VA will help non-profits better understand the veteran community's needs. Identifying and sharing the VA's service gaps can lend to a team approach to fill every gap and meet every need by outsourcing services. It is critical that we leverage innovative technology to support predictive analysis allowing for intervention and ultimately eliminating veteran suicide crisis.



Understanding that sustainable care and successful suicide prevention is individualized, there is no single program that works for everyone, we must do more than share data; we must collaborate to create a national community of support and tackle suicide one person at a time.

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