

STATEMENT OF COMBINED ARMS BEFORE THE
VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
U.S. SENATE

MULTI-SECTORAL COLLABORATION: LEVERAGING PUBLIC AND PRIVATE
PARTNERSHIPS TO IMPROVE SERVICEMEMBER AND VETERAN OUTCOMES

November 03, 2021

Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran, distinguished members of the Committee: Thank you for this opportunity to discuss how collaboration among the VA, DoD and community-based organizations through multi-sectoral partnerships can improve outcomes for Servicemembers and Veterans.

I am excited to report that in Texas and throughout the nation, community collaboration with the VA has never been stronger. It's stronger because local VHA's and VBA leadership understand the value that additional resources and organizations bring to the collective fight of veteran transition and sustainable support. Combined Arms' 177 member agency collaborative, composed of other government agencies and nonprofit organizations serve as agile and effective force multipliers for VA programming and customer service. We're able to fill gaps in programming through our network of trusted providers, we execute inter-agency referrals between government agencies and nonprofits, and we provide increased client enrollment in VA programs by asking all of our clients if they are registered with the VA.

Combined Arms has successfully built a downstream model utilizing technology, accountability, and collaboration to help veterans and military families navigate the fragmented social determinants of health landscape and we're replicating this model in communities around the nation. In order to provide holistic transition support, continued partnerships with the DoD and VA are integral to success. While the DoD and VA can provide A-F with transition support services, it is organizations like Combined Arms that fulfill G-Z or serve those ineligible for VA services. Working in tandem enables a complete continuum of care, and Combined Arms stands ready to scale existing programs and partnerships to meet the ever evolving needs of our veteran and military families.

The Combined Arms Model

Combined Arms is a dynamic, ever-evolving collaborative impact organization that is using an innovative approach of technology and service delivery to disrupt the veteran transition landscape. By providing a veteran driven online assessment that efficiently connects veterans to member organizations and the resources the veteran needs, Combined Arms is helping veteran

and military families navigate the fragmented social determinants of health landscape. Combined Arms operates its collaborative system through four major pillars:

1. Combined Arms created an integrated technology platform that ensures thousands of military veteran families have access to 900+ customized social service resources provided by our 177 vetted member organizations. Combined Arms has flipped the accountability from the veteran to the service organizations through our unique data driven methodology and enforced accountability mechanism that requires all member organizations to respond within 72 hours of a veteran clients' request.
2. Combined Arms has developed a white-labelled technology referral platform that we have deployed to veteran non-profit hubs and collaboratives across the nation. This technology platform lives within the community in which it is deployed, efficiently and expeditiously connecting and serving nonprofits, government agencies, and military and veteran families. Currently, Combined Arms' technology platform is live and powering veteran hub ecosystems in 26 states across the nation. With our national partner referral network, which consists of 43 organizations covering the US, Combined Arms can serve the veteran community and connect them to social service resources in all 50 states.
3. Utilizing our member organization network, Combined Arms has developed an inter-agency referral tool called Check-In. This application is available via Desktop or Mobile, and can refer a veteran to any organization in the collaborative in less than 30 seconds, or can refer a veteran directly to our licensed social work intake team, if a more hands-on approach is required for care. Through this referral process, the referrer receives high-level case updates to ensure that the veteran or family member they referred, is being taken care of.
4. Combined Arms runs a co-working space that's available to all 177 government and nonprofit agencies. This co-working space is centrally-located and creates intentional collaborative collisions for those professionals that serve military veteran families. The Combined Arms Center is also a single point of entry from transitioning service members, veterans, and their families.

These four pillars have effectively connected over 50,000 unique veteran clients to the 900+ resources provided by the 177 member organizations since 2016. It is self-driven by the veteran and custom-fit for their needs based on how they answer the assessment. Little effort is required on behalf of clients who may be in crisis mode, unable to access other services, or unaware of services that exist. If a client reports a score less than 13 from the World Health Organization wellbeing index or "WHO 5" on the profile, then an alert is sent to the intake team for additional follow up on mental health. Every time a client returns to our system 30 days apart, the system automatically asks for an update on the WHO 5 and tracks the data so we can see trends of their responses. Similarly, if clients report being homeless or living in a shelter, then an alert is sent to the Intake Team for additional follow up and assessment to ensure the client is properly referred

to vetted housing programs. The Intake Team provides ongoing follow up with veterans reporting they are homeless until permanent housing has been confirmed. The Combined Arms Intake Team is trained on STRONG STAR's [Crisis Response Plan](#) if they engage with clients demonstrating suicidal ideation.

The Combined Arms system actively prevents client re-traumatization, as pertinent information can be shared between the Combined Arms system and the member organization delivering services. Clients are not asked the same questions multiple times, thus reducing frustration and increasing speed and efficiency of service delivery. The standard procedure is that Combined Arms member organizations follow up with the referred client within 3 days per the contract agreed upon. All of the aforementioned components act as “prevention nudges” - minor yet impactful structural supports that keep clients engaged in care and community which are both preventative measures and facilitators of veteran health. Case progression is monitored by Combined Arms regularly to ensure that no clients are slipping through the cracks. Because of this experience, we firmly believe that suicide prevention lies in the ability to provide direct access to social services to the veteran as far upstream in their transition process as possible. If we can prevent unemployment and underemployment, substance abuse, family challenges, homelessness, and criminal behavior by accelerating veteran access to critically needed resources in a faster, more efficient way then we will prevent veteran suicides.

Federal Collaborations

Collaboration with the VA

15 different VA programs and clinics at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) have been assigned to work within the Combined Arms system ranging from the Post Deployment Clinic to Womens Clinic to the Mental Health and TBI and Benefits programs and other peer support or outreach programs. The objective is for the VA to utilize the Combined Arms system to refer veteran patients to vetted government and nonprofit agencies delivering social services not provided by MEDVAMC. Similarly, other agencies can refer veteran clients into the VBA and VHA programs. Additionally, on a monthly basis, Combined Arms, MEDVAMC, and Houston Regional Office (VBA) join forces on “Vet Connect Days” to make VBA and VHA programs and care more accessible to veteran clients seeking services through the Combined Arms system. These events increase client enrollment into VA programs.

MEDVAMC is also one of few VA hospitals in the nation that work with local organizations like Combined Arms and county Medical Examiner to track, analyze, and report veteran suicides in the region served. Based on the data available to these partners, the Combined Arms team and VA partners discovered that approximately 65 veterans died by suicide in Harris County - the fourth largest veteran population in the United States - last year. Their average age is 53 with the most vulnerable populations being the youngest and oldest generation of veterans, aged 25-

33 and 65+ years. This data is important for Combined Arms partners to better understand what programs and services can be deployed to actively prevent future veteran suicides and ensure that the number of deaths by suicide each year continues to decline.

South Carolina Department of Veteran Affairs

Combined Arms has partnered directly with the South Carolina Department of Veteran Affairs and key statewide veteran non-profits to deliver our technology platform as a foundation to strengthen veteran support and the coordinated delivery of services in the state. Through this partnership, the SCDVA, and veteran backbone hubs can execute inter-agency referrals for veterans and military families throughout the entire state of South Carolina.

Department of Labor Collaboration

U.S. Department of Labor, Veterans' Employment and Training Service ("VETS") Employment Navigator and Partnership Pilot (ENPP) and Combined Arms, work together to better serve the population of transitioning service members (TSMs), and their spouses (S), through directly connecting TSMs/S with quality employment and training resources and opportunities to improve TSMs/S employment outcomes as they transition from military service.

Department of Defense

Since launching the Texas Veterans Network in April 2020, we have established a regular presence at Fort Hood, Fort Bliss, Dyess Air Force Base, JRB Fort Worth, and Shepard Air Force Base. Our visits are usually tied to employment or career fairs aboard the installations. Each visit allows Combined Arms the opportunity to demonstrate the importance of community based resources as well as how to connect TSMs via our technology. This valuable interaction helps educate the transitioning service member (TSM) about the basic resources available (education, benefits, employment) to them upon separation and after. In mid 2021 we noticed a significant decrease in participation aboard the base activities. The leadership at Fort Hood reported that they have seen participation decrease for most base activities with the exception of career focused opportunities and other bases have reported the same. This is a barrier for Combined Arms as meeting the TSM in person is the most intentional way for us to ensure that they get connected to resources before they separate. Combined Arms is providing the pathway for TSMs to reintegrate into their communities and seamless access to the resources/services that they need in the cities they are returning to. To ensure that no service member falls through the cracks, Combined Arms should be included in transition workshops or transition checklists which would encourage the TSM to begin a profile.

Conclusion

Combined Arms has developed, perfected, and scaled a proven downstream model to directly connect veterans and military families with organizations that serve them. In order to make meaningful progress towards our collective goal of successful veteran transitions, community-

based organizations must be given a greater opportunity to work closer with federal agencies. The earlier in the transition process that organizations like Combined Arms are able to connect with transitioning service members & their families, the more positive the transition experience and establishment of a foundation for lifelong success. By having federal, state, and community based organizations working in close collaboration, we can accelerate and streamline transitioning service member and veteran access to critically-needed resources which will help prevent unemployment and underemployment, substance abuse, family challenges, homelessness, and criminal behavior and, in turn, save veteran lives.

Thank you again for your consideration of this written testimony and for your continued service to our military veteran community.

Very Respectfully,

Mike Hutchings
CEO, Combined Arms

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'MH', with a long, sweeping horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Special thanks to Mia Garcia, Lolly Rivas, and Kelly Stormer from Combined Arms.