

Chairman Patty Murray

Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Hearing: Health and Benefits Legislation

June 27, 2012

“Welcome to today’s hearing to examine health and benefits legislation before this Committee. Like our hearing two weeks ago on economic opportunity and transition legislation, today’s agenda is ambitious and reflects important work by the members on both sides of the aisle.

Briefly I will highlight two bills.

The Mental Health ACCESS Act of 2012 is sweeping legislation that improves how VA provides mental health care. I think it is fitting that we are here considering this legislation on National PTSD Awareness Day. Over the past year, this Committee has repeatedly examined the alarming rate of suicide and the mental health crisis in our military and veterans populations. We know our servicemembers and veterans have faced unprecedented challenges multiple deployments, difficulty finding a job here at home, and isolation in their communities. Some have faced tough times reintegrating into family life, with loved ones trying to relate but not knowing how. These are the challenges our servicemembers and veterans know all too well.

But even as they turn to us for help, we’re losing the battle. Time and time again, we’ve lost servicemembers and veterans to suicide.

We are losing more servicemembers to suicide than we are to combat. Every 80 minutes a veteran takes his own life. On average this year, we have lost a servicemember to suicide once every day. But while the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs have taken important steps towards addressing this crisis, we know more must be done. We know that any solution depends upon reducing wait times and improving access to mental health care, ensuring proper diagnosis, and achieving true coordination of care and information between the Departments.

The Mental Health ACCESS Act would expand eligibility for VA mental health services to family members of veterans. It would require VA to offer peer support services at all medical centers and create opportunities to train more veterans to provide peer services. This bill will require VA to establish accurate and reliable measures for mental health services.

This Committee has held multiple hearings on VA mental health care, and we heard repeatedly about the incredibly long wait times to get into care. It's often only on the brink of crisis that a veteran seeks care. If they are told "sorry, we are too busy to help you," we have lost the opportunity to help, and that is not acceptable. Without accurate measures, VA does not know the unmet needs. Without a credible staffing model, VA cannot deploy its personnel and resources effectively.

The other bill I would like to mention today is S. 3313. The Women Veterans and Other Health Care Improvement Act of 2012 builds upon previous laws to improve VA services for women veterans and veterans with families. My bill will create a child care pilot program for veterans seeking readjustment counseling at Vet Centers and increase outreach to women veterans.

We know that as more of our men and women return from Afghanistan, VA will be called upon to provide care for our most severely wounded veterans. After suffering life changing injuries on the battlefield, these veterans now face a future forever changed. Between 2003 and 2011, we know that more than 600 servicemembers experienced blast injuries that caused trauma to their reproductive or urinary tracts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Even more have experienced other injuries, such as spinal cord injuries.

Many of these veterans dream of one day starting a family. But with the injuries they've sustained on the battlefield that may not be possible without some extra help. While the Department of Defense and Tricare are now able to provide advanced fertility treatment to injured servicemembers, today VA can only provide limited treatment. VA's services do not even begin to meet the needs of our most seriously injured veterans or their families.

My bill will help make real the dream of starting a family by authorizing VA to provide advanced fertility treatment to severely wounded veterans. By authorizing these treatments, we will bring VA services in line with what DOD and Tricare already provide. It's the right thing to do and it's what our veterans deserve.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses, and thank you all for joining us this morning."