

Written Testimony of  
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Augusta, GA

Before the  
U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs

September 9, 2020

Testimony on "S.785: Leading the Way to Comprehensive Mental Health Care and Suicide Prevention for Veterans".

Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Tester and Members of the Committee:

Thank you so much for your invitation to Mission Roll Call to provide written testimony on the veteran suicide epidemic and how our Country can effectively address it. I request my testimony be added for the record.

It is my great honor as Executive Director to represent Mission Roll Call and our members—1,134,546 of them. Mission Roll Call is a new model for advocacy for a new era. We are a non-partisan digital grass roots movement that leverages technology to communicate individually and directly with veterans and their families. Mission Roll Call's first survey asked what issue was most important to our members, and the response was overwhelmingly clear—the veteran suicide crisis. As a veteran of Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom, and currently serving as a Major in the United States Army Reserves, I am experiencing losing those with whom I have served in combat by taking their own life. For them and for my Soldiers who will separate from service—I thank you for your work on S785, and hope that it can be implemented immediately and address the House draft and proposed changes separately, but concurrently.

Following our first poll, Mission Roll Call led a petition that received 200,000 signatures calling on Congress to acted bipartisanly and bi-camerally to rapidly pass meaningful suicide prevention legislation. You have taken a great step towards that with the unanimous passing of S785, and our members agree. Last month, Mission Roll Call polled 600,000 veterans and their families with 87.2% of respondents believing that the Department of Veterans Affairs should partner with community based non-profits and non-government organizations to help prevent veteran suicide.

The Commander John Scott Hannon Mental Health Care Improvement Act (S785) is the most comprehensive and integrated veteran suicide prevention measure to date. The proposed solutions in S785 are full spectrum and will meet the needs of veterans no matter where they in their lives. Programs in Section 202 such as recreational therapy and post traumatic growth programs are effective upstream to not only prevent veteran suicide but also promote thriving and vibrant veteran lives.

Senate Bill 785 also provides for an increased capacity of mental health care at the Department of Veterans Affairs (Section 501). An overwhelming majority of our members that responded to our survey, 94.8%, agree that we are not doing enough for the mental health care of our veterans. Increased access and capacity to mental health care is critical to help stem veteran suicide.

In addition to leveraging technology to understand the needs and views of our members, Mission Roll Call travels the United States to speak with, capture, and tell individual stories of veterans.

One of our most profound interviews was with Mike Daly, a Vietnam veteran, a 30-year employee of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and current Executive Director of the Philadelphia Vietnam Veterans Memorial. When asked how we can help solve the veteran suicide crisis, Mike said it best, "...veterans need to find a group to be a part of, and to seek counseling if they need it from the VA. We've got a lot of really great counselors from all the wars, but most importantly, don't ever give up."

S785 supports the community groups that know their veterans best and who can reach out and engage them, as well as increasing capacity for mental health programs at the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Mission Roll thanks you for your to passage of S785 to comprehensively help stem veteran suicide. Time is of the essence with a shortening legislative calendar, and the House of Representatives has opportunity to fulfill our sacred duty to our veterans and their families. The veteran suicide crisis is a national security issue, as it prevents our very best citizens from joining the Armed Forces.

We placed our trust in you when we joined the Armed Forces to serve, and we place our trust in you now. We must act swiftly to counter the veteran suicide epidemic.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony.

Garrett D. Cathcart

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