STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD
OF
SRI BENSON
HEALTH POLICY ANALYST
VETERANS' AFFAIRS AND REHABILITATION DIVISION
THE AMERICAN LEGION
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES SENATE
ON
"BRIDGING THE GAP: ENHANCING OUTREACH TO SUPPORT VETERANS' MENTAL HEALTH"

APRIL 29, 2025

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and distinguished members of this Committee, on behalf of National Commander James LaCoursiere Jr., and more than 1.5 million dues-paying members of The American Legion, we thank you for the opportunity to offer our testimony for the record on pending and draft legislation.

The American Legion is guided by active Legionnaires who dedicate their time and resources to serve veterans, servicemembers, their families, and caregivers. As a resolutions-based organization, our positions are directed by more than 106 years of advocacy and resolutions that originate at the post level of our organization. Every time The American Legion testifies, we offer a direct voice from the veteran community to Congress.

It cannot be overstated how crucial it is to discuss and destigmatize mental health challenges within the military and veteran community. Mental health and suicide prevention remains one of the top legislative priority areas for The American Legion.

Veterans do not exist in a vacuum. Veterans have families, financial obligations, gender-specific needs, complex medical diagnoses, and exist within a civilian-majority world that often does not fully understand their unique challenges. The American Legion recognizes this broad scope and is proud to approach this effort with hope and optimism—by Winning the War Within. Not only is this commitment demonstrated through The American Legion's robust programmatic efforts but is personal to our national staff and volunteers who have first-hand experience with this issue.

This year, we have increased our efforts to empower Legion Family and community members to help veterans in crisis by providing resources through our Be the One Suicide Prevention program. The program offers training to help individuals intervene safely and confidently when a veteran is at risk. This training include the Columbia Lighthouse Project, QPR (question, persuade, refer) protocol, and VA S.A.V.E. All these resources can be found on our Be the One webpage at no cost. Currently 19,000 individuals have been trained in the Columbia protocol or QPR. It is the goal of The American Legion to have 60,000 Legion Family members trained in suicide prevention by the end of the year. The American Legion is pleased to see Congress taking the national issue of veteran suicide seriously and looks forward to discussing the following legislation.

S. 609: Building Resources and Access for Veterans' Mental Health Engagement (BRAVE) Act

To improve mental health services of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.

The American Legion is proud to support the BRAVE Act. This legislation covers many areas that fall within the legislative priorities of The American Legion. This includes ensuring the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has the resources necessary to strengthen its mental health care workforce, infrastructure, and services. Additionally, this legislation addresses gaps in services tailored to women veterans and those suffering from spinal cord injuries or disorders.

Sec. 101 of this legislation calls the Secretary of VA to review market pay surveys to determine if the salaries of VA employees are similar to the private sector. The American Legion supports Sec. 101, 103, and 202 of the BRAVE Act through Resolution No. 115: *Department of Veterans Affairs Recruitment and Retention* which supports legislation addressing the recruitment and retention challenges at the VA regarding pay disparities and urges the VA to work more comprehensively with community partners to fill critical shortages within the VA ranks. In recent years, the VA prioritized the hiring of more providers and administrative employees to meet the needs of veterans.

Sec. 202 and 203 aim to improve Vet Centers by calling on the Comptroller General to submit a report to the Department of Veterans Affairs to guide the expansion of the real property footprint of Vet Centers. The American Legion supports these sections through Resolution No. 130: *Vet Centers Expansion to Rural Communities* which calls for the expansion of Department of Veterans Affairs' Vet Centers geographic locations to maximize the reach to rural veterans. The American Legion agrees that Vet Centers are an integral part of VA's service offerings. In a message from The American Legion's past National Commander to the membership, Vincent Troiola called on Congress to support the funding, implementation and continued expansion of VA and community-based mental health services through Vet Centers.[1]

The American Legion was especially pleased to see attention given to the unique needs of women veterans by incorporating weighted risk factors to the Recovery Engagement and Coordinator for Health-Veterans Enhanced Treatment program (REACH VET) such as MST and intimate partner violence. National Commander James LaCoursiere highlighted this key section in his quote of support, stating,

> *"On behalf of the 2.5 million veterans, family members, and caregivers in The American Legion family, we are proud to support the BRAVE Act. We applaud Senator Blumenthal for continuing this important work to ensure veterans and their families have access to comprehensive and robust mental health care. This bill was built on the very real and traumatic experiences that veterans, especially women, face during and after their service. We look forward to working with the Congress and our partners in the VSO community to see that this becomes law."*

[1] The American Legion. "Vet Centers as a Mental Health Solution." *The American Legion*, April 2023. https://www.legion.org/information-center/news/commander/2023/april/vet-centers-as-a-mental-health-solution.

In 2024, The American Legion conducted a System Worth Saving (SWS) visit to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Phoenix Health Care System, also referred to as Carl T. Hayden Veterans Administration Medical Center. While attending the town hall meeting hosted by The American Legion Phoenix Post 001, a local Legionnaire described her experience seeking treatment for her military sexual trauma (MST). She had a sense of gratefulness mixed with frustration regarding her experience with the mental health services she received at the in-patient mental health ward on the fifth floor of the hospital. She was grateful for being seen immediately with a warm handoff from her battle buddy, a fellow Legionnaire, but noted frustration with the lack of gender specific treatment options in the inpatient ward. Mindy spoke of how uncomfortable she felt receiving treatment relating to her MST in a co-ed mental health ward, and how beneficial it would be to create a women's ward. VA&R Chairman Jay Bowen agreed, citing our recent SWS visit to Tampa with a dedicated entrance for the women's health clinic, and a female specific wing in the inpatient mental health ward was identified as a best practice for Phoenix to consider.

The American Legion supports Sec. 301–303 of this legislation through Resolution No. 147: *Women Veterans* which urges that the needs of the current and future women veteran population be met and demands that VA provide full comprehensive health services for women veterans department-wide, including increasing treatment areas and diagnostic capabilities for women's health issues, improved coordination of maternity care, and increased availability of female therapists and women's group therapy to better provide treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder from combat and MST.

The American Legion supports Sec. 401–404 through Resolution No. 1: *Be the One Mental Wellness Committee* which established the Be The One Mental Wellness Committee, which is charged with examining recent trends of veteran suicide as it relates to traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder, military sexual trauma, etc. and analyzing best practices in veteran suicide prevention and encouraging the Department of Defense and VA to adopt them. Supporting our women veterans is one such best practice.

The American Legion *supports* S. 609 the BRAVE Act as currently written.

S. 1139: HOPE for Heroes Act

To amend the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019 to modify and reauthorize the Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.

This legislation outlines modifications and reauthorization of the Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Services Grant Program (SSG Fox SPGP) of the Department of Veterans Affairs. The American Legion has long supported the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act and the Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program.

In 2019, Katie Purswell, Deputy Director for Health Policy for The American Legion, testified before the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs on the *Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act*. During her testimony, she states, "our organization understands mental health care does not have a one size fits all solution in preventing suicide. It is

a complex problem that needs to be treated at an individual level as each veteran's situation is unique," Purswell said. "As a Legion member, and as a veteran who has been touched by this tragedy, I am proud to say the American Legion supports this bill in its entirety."[2]

When asked to testify on this subject before the House Committee on Veterans Affairs on December 17, 2024, Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Director Cole Lyle stated, "Fox grants have allowed organizations to coordinate initiatives related to post-traumatic growth, peer-support services, and cultural/faith-based programs." This upstream approach aligns with The American Legion's *Be the One* campaign and Buddy Check program, and we strongly support any effort by this committee to address the veteran suicide epidemic. But we also recognize Congress' duty to ensure taxpayer dollars are going to effective programs and organizations.[3] The American Legion strongly believes that community-based suicide prevention efforts are critical to addressing the national issue of veteran suicide.

The reauthorization provided by this legislation includes extending the maximum amount of Fox grant funding from $750,000 to $1,000,000, with additional metric-based incentives as determined by the VA Secretary, not to exceed a total of $1,500,000 per year. The House companion bill caps this amount at $500,000 but includes a per-veteran incentive which would match the full Senate grant after 50-100 program enrollees. The American Legion looks forward to working with Congress and the Veteran Service Organization community to determine which structure the final authorization will take. If the per-veteran structure of funding is chosen, it is important to only count veterans which have received both pre-program and post-program screening to ensure program effectiveness can be measured.

To improve coordination efforts between the VA and grant recipients, this bill requires the Secretary to provide VA medical centers (VAMC) within 100 miles of the "primary location" of grant recipients with a briefing of the services provided. The American Legion recognizes how this change will improve both coordination and outreach to veterans who could benefit from these programs, however we would like to identify additional improvements which could be adopted during markup.

First, this section identifies VAMCs "local to the primary location of grantees" but does not recognize many grantees have primary business locations in urban areas while conducting their programs in rural areas. Veteran Rites Inc., which provides spiritual healing through connection to nature for veterans, caregivers, and survivors, is one such grant recipient. Veteran Rites Inc. holds their primary business location near Tacoma, Washington but conducts many program events hundreds of miles away in eastern Washington and Oregon. Veterans who are local to program events but far from the "primary location" will not benefit under the current proposed language.

Second, only VAMCs within 100 miles are briefed on a grant recipient program. Some grant recipients are not within 100 miles of any VAMC and will not be included in this brief. Upstate Warrior Solution is a grantee which provides education, employment, justice, and spiritual support

[2] https://www.legion.org/information-center/news/legislative/2020/september/american-legion-testifies-on-bill-aimed-at-reducing-veteran-suicide

[3] The American Legion. "Legion Supports Requiring VA to Establish Clear Objectives for Suicide Prevention Programs." *The American Legion*, December 18, 2024. https://www.legion.org/information-center/news/legislative/2024/december/legion-supports-requiring-va-to-establish-clear-objectives-for-suicide-prevention-programs.:contentReference[oaicite:0]{index=0}

to veterans of South Carolina, however the nearest VAMC is 113 miles away, leaving them without a VA coordination partner.

These challenges are not insurmountable. One potential solution would be to allow grantees to select which VA facilities to partner with, provided those facilities employ "Suicide Prevention Community Engagement and Partnerships Coordinators" or similar staff. This flexibility would allow grantees to coordinate directly with VA personnel near their programs.

As noted in the Congressional Mandated Report (CMR-VA1-00189018),[4] follow up mental health screenings are not required, therefore only 9% of SPGP participants have completed post-program screenings, and only 31% of grantee programs have conducted any type of post-program screening. Due to the lack of statistically significant follow-up data, it is difficult to determine the effectiveness of the grantee's programs. However, the VA interim report predicted post-program screening participation will increase, and the lack participation is simply a product of the start-up process.[5]

Despite the lack of quantitative data detailing the effectiveness of the program, qualitative data strongly indicates a positive effect of these programs in the veteran community. The American Legion enthusiastically supports peer-led suicide prevention programs, especially those which bring veterans to the VA for follow up care. If the interim report is correct, and more actionable data will be available in the final report expected September 2025, The American Legion eagerly awaits more reported success in its conclusions.

In addition to providing innovative peer-led suicide prevention services to 3,204 veterans and family members, the SSG Fox SPGP referred 2,396 (69%) of those participants to additional VA programs.[6] This is the spirit of the SSG Fox SPGP, that whether a grantee offers equine therapy, neighborhood services, obstacle courses, group gaming, art therapy, or wilderness backpacking—all doors lead back to expert care at the VA.

Patriot Social Hours is a new initiative created by American Legion Department of Maryland Commander David Heredia, promoting the *Be the One* effort while offering outreach, fundraising opportunities, and services to veterans and their families. This initiative uses mission-driven outreach to bring the community into The American Legion posts and creates an informal welcoming space for veterans and non-veterans alike. Nearly 100 people showed up for the first Patriot Social Hour, and the momentum has continued to grow. These efforts have helped raise nearly $150,000 that will assist veterans and their families by supporting VA medical centers throughout Maryland, providing emergency financial assistance during times of crisis, expanding outreach efforts to reach underserved veterans, enhancing access to mental health services, and training of veteran service officers (VSOs) to expedite the VA claims process.

The American Legion's *Be the One* initiative and other peer support initiatives are having a tangible impact on veterans across the nation. One such veteran, John Brouse, was experiencing mental health challenges and was on the brink of losing his job. He tried to re-enlist but was told he was too old. In a recent Legion article, John notes how grateful he is to The American Legion

[4] U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. *Congressional Mandated Report, CMR-VA1-00189018*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2024. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CMR-VA1-00189018/pdf/CMR-VA1-00189018.pdf.
[5] Ibid
[6] Ibid

stating, “I reached out to my local American Legion post, and not only did they help me, but they embraced me,” he recalled. Brouse continued,

> “They took me in, they helped me every way possible. They helped me get my life back on track. I'm so grateful to them. They saved my life. When I got engaged with The American Legion, I was like a dying plant, and they fed me.” [7]

There is clear synergy between the SPGP program and The American Legion’s own peer support initiatives, and we fully support the HOPE for Heroes Act. Two sections could be adjusted for even better results.

Subsection (h) EMERGENT SUICIDE CARE of the bill has well-meaning intent; however, the actual language would require the VA to provide services within 72 hours to any SPGP program participant referred to the VA. The intent of this language applies to emergency services. However, according to USC 38 sect. 1720J, emergency suicide prevention services are already automatically granted as community care services. Because 75% of SPGP participants are referred to the VA for further services, this requirement would create an influx of community care waivers, greatly expanding the cost of the program.[8] 300 participants were referred to emergency services during the first year of the program, without any reported difficulty of applying 1720J for community care.[9] This language was changed September 18th of 2024 in H.R.9438– *No Wrong Door Act* of the 118th Congress to reiterate the application of 1720J for emergency services,[10] and The American Legion urges similar updates to S.1139.

Subsection (d) SUICIDE PREVENTION SERVICES requires the use of the Columbia suicide-severity rating scale (CSSRS) during assessments. This requirement was included in the 2024 House reauthorization bill for the SSG Fox SPGP but was updated in the 2025 version to allow the VA Secretary to select the assessment protocols. This change improves the flexibility of the program and does not require each grant recipient to all use the same screening protocols, which may not necessarily be an appropriate fit for their program.

The American Legion has been very closely following the SSG Fox SPGP and fully supports the reauthorization. The American Legion supports this legislation through Resolution No. 364: *Department of Veterans Affairs to Develop Outreach and Peer to Peer Program for Rehabilitation* which urges the President of the United States and the U.S. Congress to call on the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to develop a national program to provide peer to peer rehabilitation services based on the recovery model tailored to meet the specialized needs of current generation combat-affected veterans and their families.

Additionally, we support this legislation through Resolution No. 14: *Department of Veterans Affairs Suicide Prevention Programs* which urges VA and other collaborating organizations to

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[7] Howard, Henry. "‘They Helped Me Get My Life Back on Track.’" *The American Legion*, March 28, 2025. https://www.legion.org/information-center/news/be-the-one/2025/march/they-helped-me-get-my-life-back-on-track.

[8] U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. *Congressional Mandated Report, CMR-VA1-00189018*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2024. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CMR-VA1-00189018/pdf/CMR-VA1-00189018.pdf.

[9] Ibid

[10] U.S. House of Representatives. Committee on Veterans’ Affairs. *Amendment to H.R. 9438, No Wrong Door for Veterans Act, offered by Ms. Miller-Meeks of Iowa.* 118th Cong., 2nd sess., September 18, 2024. https://docs.house.gov/meetings/VR/VR03/20240918/117647/BILLS-118-9438-M001215-Amdt-1.pdf

conduct research to evaluate the harms of current crisis responses, particularly among high-risk veteran subpopulations to identify novel solutions for responding to crises and to evaluate the effectiveness of promising new approaches.

The American Legion *supports* S. 1139 the HOPE for Heroes Act.

S. 793: A bill to amend the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019 to modify and reauthorize the Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs

To amend the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019 to modify and reauthorize the Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs

This legislation outlines modifications and reauthorization of the SSG Fox SPGP of the Department of Veterans Affairs. This includes extending the maximum amount of grant funding from $750,000 to $1,250,000.

This legislation is similar to the HOPE for Heroes Act addressed earlier in this testimony, and much of our previously stated support and recommendations for the reauthorization of the SSG Fox SPGP are the same for this bill.

However, this bill does not include some of the additional improvements for reauthorization, including support for transportation and miscellaneous technical corrections.

American Legion recognizes the SSG Fox SPGP as an important part of the suicide prevention ecosystem for American veterans and eagerly awaits the consolidated version of the bills for reauthorization of the program.

The American Legion supports this legislation through Resolution No. 14: *Department of Veterans Affairs Suicide Prevention Programs,* which supports our collaborative partners in conducting research to evaluate the harms of current crisis responses. Identifying novel solutions is the primary goal of this resolution, and the SSG Fox SPGP is the gold standard for this initiative.

The American Legion also supports this legislation through Resolution No. 364: *Department of Veterans Affair*s *to Develop Outreach and Peer to Peer Program for Rehabilitation* calls upon the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to develop a national program to provide peer to peer rehabilitation services based on science driven recovery models. Many SSG Fox SPGP grantees are operated by veterans themselves, and some of the most exciting and effective programs rely on peer support to reach other veterans in crisis.

The American Legion *supports* S. 793: A bill to amend the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019 to modify and reauthorize the Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program.

S. 1361: Every State Counts for Vets Mental Health Act

To require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to give priority in the consideration of suicide prevention grants to entities located in States that have not received such a grant, and for other purposes.

The Every State Counts for Vets Mental Health Act seeks to expand the SSG Fox SPGP by incentivizing programs in states which do not yet have any registered grantees. It is important to recognize the SSG Fox SPGP is a pilot program, with the final report scheduled to be released September 2025.

In all current drafts of the reauthorization for the SSG Fox SPGP, VAMC's are briefed only on grantees with a primary location within 100 miles of the VA facility. However, because many grantees serve multiple states, some states, such as Idaho, may receive only partial "coverage" from a grant award, if a program operates in the state but has no primary business presence there. This could be remedied by revising the bill's language from "If no entity in a particular State has received a grant under this section, the Secretary shall give all eligible entities in that State..." to "If no entity *with a primary location* in a particular State has received a grant under this section, the Secretary shall give all eligible entities *with primary locations* in that State...". This would ensure every state is appropriately considered for coverage by organizations headquartered there during the grant review process, rather than covered by entities operating primarily in another state.

Our rural veterans face unique challenges, especially when we consider the compounding effects of isolation and suicidality. Many SSG Fox SPGP grantees provide services using the healing power of nature, and these programs are uniquely suitable for the rural veteran who may be less willing to seek traditional counseling.

The American Legion supports the initiative to expand the geographic scope of the SSG Fox SPGP.

Through Resolution No. 119: *Support More Service Programs Benefiting the Rural Veteran,* The American Legion supports legislation which aims to better serve rural veterans.

The American Legion *supports* S. 1361 Every State Counts for Vets Mental Health Act *as currently written.*

CONCLUSION

Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and distinguished members of the Committee, The American Legion thanks you for your leadership and for allowing us the opportunity to provide feedback on legislation.

If this country wants to maintain an all-volunteer service, it is imperative to ensure that veterans will be cared for during and after their service. Veterans do not exist in a vacuum and their challenges—both psychological and physiological—demand a multi-faceted and dynamic approach. By tackling these issues head on through comprehensive legislation, we can reduce the epidemic of veteran suicide and demonstrate to the next generation of warfighters that they will be cared for in their worst moments.

Winning the war within is and remains The American Legion's number one priority. The American Legion looks forward to continuing this work with the Committee and providing the feedback we receive from our membership. Questions concerning this testimony can be directed to Bailey Bishop, Senior Legislative Associate, at b.bishop@legion.org.

If you or a loved one are experiencing a mental health crisis or struggling with thoughts of suicide, immediate help is available. You can contact the Veteran Crisis Line by dialing 998 or texting 838255. The Veterans Crisis Line serves Veterans, service members, National Guard and Reserve members, and those who support them.