

Historic Legislation Introduced to Combat Veteran Suicide

WASHINGTON, DC (March 27, 2014) – Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) today heralded a significant step toward combating veteran suicide in America with the introduction of new, historic and comprehensive legislation introduced by U.S. Senator John Walsh of Montana. Walsh, the first Iraq vet ever to serve in the Senate, and one of only two combat veterans, today introduced The Suicide Prevention for America's Veterans Act (SAV Act) during IAVA's National Day of Action today, in which veterans and supporters placed 1,892 American flags on the Mall representing the number of veterans and servicemembers estimated to have died by suicide to date in 2014.

"Today, Senator Walsh made history and put us on a path toward saving countless lives. We thank Senator Walsh for being the first Congressional leader to step up and sponsor historic, comprehensive legislation to combat suicide in the veteran community," said IAVA CEO and Founder Paul Rieckhoff. "Senator Walsh's bill, when passed, will ensure that our servicemen and women will have ready access to top quality mental health care and will take steps to streamline the problem that plagued communication and systems between the Department of Defense and the VA. As one of our own, we are honored to have Senator Walsh leading the charge on this life-saving fight. We hope every single member of the Senate will move swiftly to co-sponsor this urgent, bipartisan effort."

"When 22 veterans are taking their own lives every single day, this is the kind of bold action we need and expect from our leaders in Washington. IAVA will continue our Campaign to Combat Suicide all across the country until we galvanize the full bipartisan support needed to pass this bill. Our legislators should know that America's veterans are looking to Washington to see who has their back in this moment of great challenge," Rieckhoff added.

Said Senator Walsh: "Far too often, we're leaving our veterans to fight their toughest battles alone, and the crisis of veteran suicide now claims 22 of our finest men and women every single day. Returning home from combat does not erase what happened there, and yet red tape and government dysfunction have blocked access to the care that saves lives. It is our duty to come together for real solutions for our heroes. I am proud to work with Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America on this critical issue. It's time to pass the Suicide Prevention for America's Veterans Act and ensure that our veterans can enjoy what they fought so hard to protect."

"Senator Walsh really has our back. Veterans nationwide have earned top quality and accessible mental health care and this bill will go a long way toward fixing what stands in the way of that. As an Air Force veteran and native Montanan, I am very happy that this fight is being led by a fellow vet and a Senator from Montana," said Chris Ford, who is Storming the Hill with IAVA. "All Montana veterans should be proud of the leadership shown by a

leader from our home state. The IAVA veterans in Washington have worked hard all week to tell the individual Representatives and Senators about the struggles vets often face when they come home from war and transition out of the military.”

Crafted by IAVA based on the needs of our members, and in consultation with mental health experts and our fellow veterans groups, The Suicide Prevention for America’s Veterans Act (SAV Act) will:

- **Extends Special Combat Eligibility from 5 to 15 Years** – Improves access to care for troops and veterans by extending combat eligibility.
- **Reviews Wrongful Discharges** – An unknown numbers of troops who struggle with mental health issues have been discharged for behavior often caused by invisible injuries. This legislation sets up a review process for potentially wrongful discharges.
- **Increases Professionals in the VA** – This legislation increases the capacity to meet demands for mental health care professionals by repaying medical school loans for psychiatrists who commit to long-term service in the VA.
- **Improves Mental Health Care and Suicide Prevention Programs** – This legislation requires an annual review of care programs within DOD and the VA to ensure resources are effectively combatting the problem.
- **Ensures Training for Mental Health Care Providers** – This legislation requires the VA and DOD to ensure mental health care providers have special training to identify veterans at-risk for suicide.
- **Creates Greater Collaboration Between the VA and DOD** – Provides continuous and seamless care to veterans by putting a timeline on the NDAA mandate to make all DOD and VA records electronic.
- **Establishes a Common Drug Formulary Between DOD and the VA** – Requires DOD and the VA to adopt the same drug formulary for prescription medication to ensure seamless care.

The bill announcement comes on the final day of IAVA’s 10th Annual “Storm the Hill” week of advocacy in which 32 veterans from across the United States have descended on the Capitol, holding over 130 meetings with elected leaders in Congress and officials in the Department of Defense, VA and at the White House.

IAVA also used the week to launch its “We’ve Got Your Back: Campaign to Combat Suicide” designed to raise public awareness of the suicide crisis and demand Congressional action and a Presidential Executive Order to start to reverse the suicide trend.

Additional information on Storm the Hill and the Campaign to Combat Suicide

As part of its Campaign to Combat Suicide, all year long IAVA will activate every element of its membership, programs and partners – both on-the-ground and online. IAVA will incorporate this effort into everything we do from our

monthly VetTogethers to our over 500,000-person strong social media community. We will empower our almost 300,000 members and supporters to serve as a ground force for outreach, support and advocacy. And we will travel the country, turning public attention to the issue of veteran suicide and promoting solutions.

IAVA connects veterans to mental health services, including partnering with the VA's Veterans Crisis Line to ensure that every servicemember, veteran, family member and provider knows that there is free and confidential help available 24 hours a day through phone, text and online. Veterans, or those concerned about veterans, can call 800-273-8255 and press 1 to be directly connected to qualified responders.

Visit Stormthehill.org to learn more about IAVA's efforts to combat suicide, Storm the Hill and our 2014 class of Stormers. All week, IAVA will be posting photos, videos and personal stories on social media and with the #StormtheHill and #CombatingSuicide hashtags on Twitter.