

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

November 9, 2021

Hon. Mark Takano
Chairman
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
B234 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Hon. Mike Bost
Ranking Member
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
3460 O'Neill House Office Building
Washington, DC 20024

Dear Chairman Takano and Ranking Member Bost,

We write today as the lead sponsors of H.R. 67, the Veteran Overmedication and Suicide Prevention Act, to request the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs take action on our bipartisan bill to study the link between addictive opioids and the alarmingly high rate of suicide among veterans.

As you know, nearly 17 veterans die by suicide each day, a rate nearly twice as high as civilians. Due in part to this troubling statistic, we believe this bill is not only commonsense, but entirely necessary to help combat this tragic epidemic.

Our legislation, endorsed by three of the nation's major veterans service organizations, would require the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to review the deaths of all veterans it treated who died by suicide or from a drug overdose in the last five years. This important new information will be used to better treat veterans suffering from both mental and physical injuries and is critical to learning if prescription drugs, particularly opioid painkillers, are a contributing factor in suicide-related veteran deaths.

The VFW, which endorsed our legislation, stated that "[u]nderstanding the impact of overmedication and veteran suicide begins with data. This legislation will help illuminate the seriousness and scope of this causation. Reducing the number of service members and veterans who die by suicide has been a priority for the VFW and will remain so until it is no longer needed. We must do whatever it takes to save the almost 20 service members and veterans who die by suicide every day."

According to a September 2019 VA report:

- At least 60,000 veterans died by suicide between 2008 and 2017.
- Veteran suicides account for about 15 percent of all suicides in the United States, with a veteran committing suicide every 72 minutes.
- The VA has a history of freely prescribing opioid pain medication to veterans, reaching its highest level in 2012 with more than 438,000 long-term opioid patients.
- Unfortunately, despite the VA taking steps to reduce the number of opioid prescriptions it dispenses by 70 percent between 2012 and 2020, veterans are still committing suicide at a startling rate.

Given the recent call by seven former VA secretaries to create a National Warrior Call Day to raise awareness about military and veteran suicides, and the fact that more than 93,000 Americans died from an overdose last year, it is clear we must do more to end this crisis and help reduce this needless and preventable loss of life.

Furthermore, earlier this year, the U.S. House passed legislation that included our bipartisan amendment to fund the review called for in our bill and to provide a report to Congress. Thank you for your service and commitment to our nation's many veterans and I look forward to your prompt reply to this critically important issue.

Sincerely,



Vern Buchanan
Member of Congress



Gerald E. Connolly
Member of Congress