

**Oversight and Reform National Security Subcommittee Hearing:  
“Invisible Wounds: Preventing Suicide in Our Nation’s Military and Veteran Communities”**

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Written Testimony:

The issue of veteran’s suicide has become a trendy topic. Awareness, it seems, is the cheapest currency for a problem so deeply misunderstood that we continue to lose lives at an astonishingly consistent rate. As an 8-year Marine Corps veteran with combat deployments to both Iraq and Afghanistan, the latter of which took both of my legs above the knee in August of 2010, this trend stormed into my own life the Friday before St Patrick’s Day in 2012 when my high school best friend Marine Sgt Chris McDonald took his own life. At the time, I was working as a fellow for the House Veterans Affairs Committee. My friend Chris was 4 years removed from a combat deployment where he suffered both physical and mental injuries. He was prescribed 180 5mg tablets of hydrocodone a month for a hip injury he’d suffered in Iraq in 2008 but received no treatment for his mental trauma.

Chris was the epitome of hard work and discipline. His father, our middle school football coach and high school technology teacher is a Marine Combat veteran from Desert Storm, and whether it was football, baseball or academics, Chris gave everything 110% and couldn’t accept failure. The months prior to Chris’ suicide, he became extremely addicted to opioids and began to lie, steal and cheat his closest friends and family to supply his destructive habit. Finally, at Christmas 2011 his parents, his roommate and I intervened. We submitted a written affidavit to the local authorities that he was a danger to himself and others, and he was taken to a mandatory 72-hour detox hold. Afterwards he admitted his problems and asked for help.

Unfortunately help wasn’t what the VA offered. Not real help. He was told his case wasn’t severe enough for inpatient rehab. He came to me desperate, and even working in Congress I felt helpless to save my best friend. Ultimately, he decided taking his own life was the only way to ensure he no longer hurt or let down those he loved most. But as anyone who’s lost a loved one to suicide knows, that couldn’t be further from the truth. This one act of finality hurts the innocent every day for the rest of their lives.

We cannot stand by and allow those who serve to think this is the only option.

Today, I work with many nonprofit groups to identify, assess, treat and facilitate veterans struggling with PTSD, TBI, addiction, chronic pain and insomnia. Veterans are turning to organizations like Boot Campaign, Boulder Crest Foundation, Brain Treatment Foundation, Shepherd Center’s SHARE program, Camp Southern Ground and others to find quick, individualized and nontraditional treatment protocols developed independently from the catacombs of bureaucracy and antiquated one size fits all methods that plague our VAs.

I'm not a physician, a psychologist or psychiatrist. I don't have a doctorate or masters in any field, much less mental health or medical treatment. But I challenge you to find someone with more passion and concern on this topic. I have dedicated the last decade of my life to understanding this issue in its entirety, not just through the lens of some awareness campaign or appeasement initiative. With that experience, and with the help of some of the aforementioned organizations working on this issue every single day, I have identified the following areas I feel are either overlooked, oversimplified or misunderstood altogether:

First, the role of prior service trauma, and trauma not directly caused by military or combat experience. Many, if not most veterans who legitimately claim what is commonly known as PTSD experienced trauma as a child. Many others experienced trauma from infidelity, guilt from not being close to a dying relative, not seeing their children grow up, financial stress, and other every day American experiences that can contribute and sometime cause the deterioration of mental health.

Secondly, the DOD must take responsibility for vetting, treating and transitioning veterans. The VA gets all the blame, and it is clear more must be done to improve how we treat veterans. But to have a paradigm shift in this issue we must look at root causes. We spend 3-12 months training a civilian to be a service member. We train them for 6 months to deploy, and we spend years grooming them for their next promotion. But when it comes time to leave the military, for many facing their first experience with civilian life as an adult, we spend 2 weeks or less training them to transition. As someone who has seen the worst horrors war has to offer, I can honestly and earnestly say that transitioning out of the Marine Corps was the single most traumatic and least trained for experience in my military career.

And lastly, we must acknowledge and assist the good work that is being done by nonprofit organizations and private health care providers. The VA, and federal government at large, moves slow. Sometimes that's by design and sometimes ulterior or partisan motives are at work. I'm not here to demonize the VA or complain about how things get done in government. But I can tell you that there are treatment protocols and outreach successes being made by these organizations that are absolutely saving lives. Many of these organizations need grants and financial resources, while others merely need a seat at the table and access to data to expand the reach of their success and save more lives. We won't solve this problem with a government-only solution.

I want to thank you all for this opportunity. I know government often seems like nothing more than a team sport. But for this issue, I commend you all for leaving partisan politics at the door and standing ready to do your job with integrity and selfless concern for America's heroes. As a veteran, and a grateful American, please consider me a resource and dedicated soldier in this fight against our third and most deadly war over these past two decades. It is our responsibility to do everything we can to save our military service members from the enemy within, a war fought here at home, in our homes and among our friends and families. Thank you.