



# H.R. 6273 – Bipartisan VA Zero Suicide Demonstration Project Act

*Introduced by Rep. Susie Lee (D-NV), Rep. Tony Gonzales (R-TX), Rep. Colin Allred (D-TX), and Rep. Anthony Gonzalez (R-OH)*

## **The need:**

- Over the past two decades, the average number of veteran suicides per day has increased by almost 5% up to 17.2 in 2019.<sup>1</sup>
- For veterans who have served since September 11, 2001, the rate is even more troubling, with 30,117 active-duty service members and veterans dying by suicide, over four times the number of combat deaths over the past two decades.<sup>2</sup>
- The current rate of veteran suicides has surged in recent years, with post-9/11 war veterans' rates exceeding civilian rates after being much lower historically.<sup>3</sup>
  - Veterans in 2019 died from suicide at a rate 52.3% higher than non-veterans in the U.S., with those aged 18-34 dying at the highest rate.<sup>4</sup>
- Of the 17 veteran suicides per day in 2019, 40% were among active VA patients. While much must be done to reach the veterans currently not accessing VA resources, we also must do whatever it takes to eliminate deaths by suicide within the VA.<sup>5</sup>
- With the mental health effects of the COVID-19 pandemic still emerging, the U.S. continues to see unacceptably high rates of veteran suicides. We must ensure that we keep safe those who have sacrificed so much to keep us safe.

## **What is the Zero Suicide Initiative Pilot Program?**

- The Zero Suicide Initiative, a concept and program founded by the [Henry Ford Health Care System](#), is a program built on the belief that all suicides are preventable through proper care, patient safety, and system-wide efforts.<sup>6</sup>
  - With suicide as the 10<sup>th</sup> leading cause of death in the U.S., this program recognizes that we must take effective action now to prevent suicide.
- The Zero Suicide model has delivered clear decreases in suicide rates through innovative care pathways to assess and diminish suicide risk for patients across care systems.
- This pilot program would build on the VA's strong suicide prevention efforts by implementing more comprehensive, systems-focused Zero Suicide efforts in pilot programs at five VA medical centers across the country.

## **What this bipartisan bill does:**

- This bill would establish the Zero Suicide Initiative pilot program to implement the Zero Suicide Institute curriculum to improve veteran safety and suicide care.
- In consultation with experts and veteran service organization, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs would select five medical centers to receive training and support under the pilot program, in order to reduce the rate of veteran suicide.

- The legislation aims to demonstrate the effectiveness of Zero Suicide programming through pilots at the five VA locations in preparation to better combat suicides across the entire VA.
- This legislation is a continuation of efforts by Rep. Lee and her colleagues to end veteran suicide and improve veteran care overall.
  - In December 2020, Rep. Lee's bill, the [Leave No Veteran Behind Act](#), was passed into law as a provision in the COMPACT Act, requiring the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to reach out to veterans with whom they have not had contact in two or more years, to ensure that every veteran is aware and has access to the comprehensive medical services provided by the VA.

### **National Endorsing Organizations:**

- Student Veterans of America (SVA)
- Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW)
- Disabled Veterans of America (DAV)
- International Society of Psychiatric Mental Health Nurses (ISPN)
- American Psychiatric Association (APA)
- WestCare Foundation
- American Association for Psychoanalysis in Clinical Social Work (AAPCSW)
- National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)

### **Nevada Endorsing Organizations:**

- Nevada Veterans Association
- Forgotten Not Gone
- Women Veterans of Nevada

### **Hear Directly from Veteran Service and Mental Health Organizations About Why We Need this Bill:**

- "The VFW supports the *VA Zero Suicide Demonstration Project Act of 2021* because this is an evidence-based suicide solution. This multi-layered approach consists of continuous suicide screening at all health care touchpoints and suicide specific treatments while maintaining consistent communication with the veteran. Removing the stigma of discussing suicide and fostering a healthy conversation can lead to a goal of zero suicide."
  - *Tammy Barlet, MPH, Deputy Director at Veterans of Foreign Wars*
- "It's simply unacceptable that veterans are twice more likely to die by suicide than those who never served, and it should be a national priority to get the veteran suicide rate to as close to zero as possible. DAV proudly supports this important bipartisan legislation, and we're hopeful that the Zero Suicide Initiative framework will be a powerful tool in reducing these entirely preventable tragedies."
  - *Andy Marshall, National Commander for Disabled Veterans of America*
- "With the aim of bringing veteran suicide deaths to zero, the American Psychiatric Association enthusiastically supports the VA Zero Suicide Demonstration Project Act. By implementing Zero Suicide pilot programs at five VA medical centers across the country, the legislation would increase access to safer and concurrent suicide care. Bringing the Zero Suicide model of care to our veterans will help foster a cultural shift toward comprehensive suicide treatment and represent an important step in our ongoing effort to give those who defend our country the support and resources they deserve."
  - *Saul Levin, M.D., M.P.A., CEO and Medical Director for the American Psychiatric Association*

- "We must do more to support those who have sacrificed on behalf of our country. We are grateful for the introduction of the VA Zero Suicide Demonstration Project Act, which will help veterans who struggle with invisible wounds by improving access to critical suicide prevention programs."
  - *Hannah Wesolowski, Chief Advocacy Officer at the National Alliance on Mental Illness*
- "AFSP commends Representatives Lee, Gonzales, Allred, and Gonzalez on the introduction of the bipartisan VA Zero Suicide Demonstration Project Act of 2021. Veterans are at a much higher risk of dying by suicide than non-Veteran populations, so the Zero Suicide Initiative pilot program could be an innovative prevention tool that will provide valuable resources and supports to Veterans at risk for suicide. AFSP is pleased to support this legislation, and urges Congress to take action to support Veterans healthcare."
  - *Laurel Stine, J.D., M.A., Senior Vice President for Public Policy for the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention*
- "Every day WestCare provides services to thousands of veterans who are struggling with addiction and behavioral health issues. We are grateful for Congresswoman Lee's leadership. Working with her colleagues to introduce the VA Zero Suicide Demonstration Project Act will begin to provide much needed support to women and men who have sacrificed for our country and now need our help."
  - *Richard "Dick" Steinberg, President/CEO of the WestCare Foundation*
- "The Nevada Veterans Association is pleased to support this bipartisan legislation that places our VA centers in a position of action to create and expand Veteran suicide preventative measures."
  - *Donna Lee, President of the Nevada Veterans Association*
- "Forgotten Not Gone supports the VA Zero Suicide Demonstration Project Act because one Veteran life lost is too many."
  - *Peter and Kelley Guigry, CEO's and Founders of Forgotten Not Gone*

**To review this legislation, see the [Congress.gov](#) page for [H.R. 6273](#).**

**For more information or to cosponsor or endorse this bill, please contact:**  
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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2021/2021-National-Veteran-Suicide-Prevention-Annual-Report-FINAL-9-8-21.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/22/us/911-suicide-rate-veterans.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/22/us/911-suicide-rate-veterans.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2021/2021-National-Veteran-Suicide-Prevention-Annual-Report-FINAL-9-8-21.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2021/2021-National-Veteran-Suicide-Prevention-Annual-Report-FINAL-9-8-21.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.henryford.com/services/behavioral-health/zero-suicide>