

U.S. Sens. Baldwin Sullivan, Tester, Daines: Introduce bipartisan legislation to combat veteran suicide crisis

Posted on Wednesday, Dec 11, 2019

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – U.S. Senators Tammy Baldwin (D-WI), Dan Sullivan (R-AK), Jon Tester (D-MT), and Steve Daines (D-MT) introduced bipartisan legislation to expand community-based outreach that will help veterans access services to improve their health and wellness and prevent suicides.

The number of veteran suicides nationwide continues to rise, and approximately 14 of the 20 veterans who die by suicide each day are not receiving care from the Veterans Health Administration. County Veteran Service Officers (CVSOs) are often the first point of contact in the community for veterans and are on the frontlines in this battle against veteran suicides by helping enroll veterans into the VA Health Administration. The *Commitment to Veteran Support and Outreach (CVSO) Act* will increase resources for CVSOs that will better connect more veterans to the services they need.

“In 2017 alone, more than 6,100 veterans died by suicide, an amount nearly equal to the number of servicemembers killed in action in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001. The veteran suicide rate has stayed relatively constant for the past 10 years and we need to do something about it,” **said Senator Baldwin.** “County Veteran Service Officers are on the frontlines everyday working to combat this tragic crisis, and this bipartisan legislation will support their efforts to provide needed services and solutions for our veterans that will improve their health and well-being.”

“Alaska is home to more than 75,000 veterans, yet less than half of them are currently enrolled in the VA system,” **said Senator Sullivan.** “That means thousands of veterans are not connected to the benefits and health care services that they have earned. Local partners and veteran service officers are crucial resources in states, like Alaska, to reaching these off-the-grid veterans. This bipartisan bill, along with the groundwork already being done at my request by the Veterans Benefits Administration in Alaska, will reinforce the VA’s mission to expand its reach and ensure veterans who live in rural, frontier states do not get left behind.”

“Too often our Montana veterans have to drive hundreds of miles one way to get to help with VA claims,” **said Senator Daines.** “This bipartisan legislation provides critical resources to expand outreach for Montana veterans to help with their healthcare, benefits and wellness needs.”

Veterans are not always aware of the benefits available to them and CVSOs are often the first to inform them of their eligibility. CVSOs are local county employees who are nationally accredited by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to help veterans process their VA claims. These employees are responsible for successfully processing more than \$22 billion in claims annually for direct compensation and pension benefits for veterans. They also provide assistance to veterans on a range of benefits and services, including compensation benefits, VA home loans, education benefits and available job placement assistance. However, there is currently no federal funding support directly available for CVSOs.

The *CVSO Act* authorizes \$50 million annually for five years to expand and support CVSOs or similar local entities, who currently assist veterans in obtaining critical benefits and services. The VA will award competitive grants to CVSOs, through the states, to create, expand, or support programs that promote health and wellness, prevent suicide and reach veterans who need help navigating the often-burdensome VA process. By increasing the number of CVSOs, states will be able to better leverage their local and federal resources to serve our veterans.

The legislation is supported by the National Association of Counties (NACo), the National Association of County Veteran Service Officers (NACVSO), the Wisconsin

Department of Veterans Affairs, and many individual CVSOs, local officials and stakeholders in Wisconsin and Alaska.

“Counties provide much-needed services to millions of veterans and their families,” **said National Association of Counties Executive Director Matthew Chase.** “The Commitment to Veteran Support and Outreach Act will help us better connect veterans to key health, housing and career readiness resources. We applaud Senators Baldwin and Sullivan’s bipartisan efforts to support county veterans service officers, and we look forward to working with Congress to better serve veterans in our communities.”

“NACVSO applauds introduction of the ‘Commitment to Veteran Support and Outreach Act’ by Senator Tammy Baldwin. This Act will provide Federal support to County, Tribal, and State Veterans Service Officers that have historically been the first point of contact for veterans seeking to utilize their VA benefits and it will ensure that veterans have continued and expanded access to community advocates,” **said Herm Brueur, President of National Association of County Veterans Service Officers (NACVSO).**

“We currently have lost more veterans by suicide than those we have lost in executing the current wars. It is imperative to have advocates in the counties and communities where veterans and their families live to connect them with their earned benefits. This legislation provides resources to market VA benefits, create new CVSO offices to reach those who are struggling, or provide training for current CVSO offices. This will enhance the services for our veterans and ensure they have access to well-trained professional advocates at the local level to connect them to their benefits and improve the quality of their lives. They deserve these services for their service to our great country,” **said Joseph G. Aulik, Director of Veterans Services for the Brown County CVSO in Green Bay, Wisconsin.**

“We support Senator Baldwin’s initiative to strengthen our Sheboygan County Veteran Service Office outreach and services to veterans and their families. Sadly, veteran suicides continue to rise, and this funding will bolster our efforts to help people in need and save lives,” **said Adam Payne, Sheboygan County Administrator.**

“This bill reflects a wonderful partnership between the Senate, the VA, and the states working together on behalf of veterans. It will go a long way to ensure the delivery of health and wellness programs, combat suicide, and increase a state’s ability to improve outreach efforts and serve our veterans where they live – especially in frontier states, like Alaska. This is a huge step in keeping our nation’s promise to our veterans.” **said Verdie Bowen, State of Alaska Director of the Office of Veterans Affairs and former President of the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs.**

More information on the legislation is available [here](#). An online version of this release is available [here](#).

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