



Bipartisan VA Zero Suicide Demonstration Project Act

Introduced by Rep. Susie Lee (D-NV) and Rep. Tony Gonzales (R-TX)

The Need:

- A major, yet preventable health crisis in the U.S. is suicide. Heartbreakingly, Veterans comprise nearly a quarter of suicide deaths in the U.S.¹
- The suicide rate for Veterans is 1.5 times higher than that of the general population, and on average, 17 Veterans commit suicide every day.¹
- Studies show several factors play a role in higher suicide rates among Veterans. Certain factors include feelings of loneliness, isolation, stress, burnout, high exposure to trauma, easy access to and familiarity with guns, and difficulties reintegrating into civilian life.²
- 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.³
- Of the 17 veteran suicides per day, 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.⁴
- Especially following the mental health impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, 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?

- 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.¹ It is founded on the idea that one suicide is too many.
 - With suicide as the 9th 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.

What This Bipartisan, Bicameral 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.
 - This pilot program would build on the VA's suicide prevention efforts by implementing more comprehensive, systems-focused Zero Suicide efforts in VA medical centers across the country.
- In consultation with experts and veteran service organizations, 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:

- Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW)
- Disabled Veterans of America (DAV)
- American Psychiatric Association (APA)
- National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)

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 2023 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."
 – *Meggan Thomas, Associate Director at Veterans of Foreign Wars*
- "Combating the veteran suicide epidemic remains a national priority for DAV and our million-plus members. Speaking from firsthand experience, it's simply unacceptable that veterans are 57% more likely to die by suicide than those who have never served. We applaud Rep. Lee's leadership in introducing this important bipartisan legislation and are hopeful that the Zero Suicide Initiative framework will be a powerful tool in reducing these preventable tragedies."
 – *Joe Parsetich, DAV National Commander*
- "The American Psychiatric Association endorses and supports the VA Zero Suicide Demonstration Project Act. The legislation would increase access to safer and concurrent suicide care by implementing Zero Suicide pilot programs at five VA medical centers across the country," said APA CEO and Medical Director Saul Levin, M.D., M.P.A. "This important legislation will help foster a cultural shift toward comprehensive suicide treatment and represent a strong step in our ongoing efforts 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 our service members, who have sacrificed on behalf of our country," said Hannah Wesolowski, Chief Advocacy Officer at NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness. "NAMI is grateful to Rep. Susie Lee for the introduction of the VA Zero Suicide Demonstration Project Act, which will provide our veterans with invisible wounds with needed mental health resources and improve access to critical suicide prevention programs."
 – *Hannah Wesolowski, Chief Advocacy Officer at the National Alliance on Mental Illness*

Senators Jacky Rosen (D-NV) and Kevin Cramer (R-ND) lead the Senate companion bill.

For more information or to cosponsor or endorse this bill, please contact:

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¹<https://americanaddictioncenters.org/veterans/suicide-among-veterans>

²<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/suicide>

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

⁴<https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2022/2022-National-Veteran-Suicide-Prevention-Annual-Report-FINAL-508.pdf>