



March 13, 2019

The Honorable Jerry Moran  
Chairman  
Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs  
521 Hart Office Building  
Washington, D.C., 20510

The Honorable Jon Tester  
Ranking Member  
Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs  
311 Hart Office Building  
Washington, D.C., 20510

The Special Operations Association of America (SOAA) fully supports S. 785, *Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019*. As a traditional Veteran Service Organization who advocate for all past, present, and future members of the Special Operations community and their families, we are proud to offer our continued support for legislation that will empower Servicemembers, Veterans, and medical professionals in the fight against suicide.

It is estimated that more than 20 Veterans die by suicide every day. Of those, 14 have received no treatment or care from the VA. The *Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act* will improve outreach to these 14 under- or unserved Veterans in five major ways: it will bolster the VA's mental health workforce by giving VA direct hiring authority for more mental health professions and placing at least one Suicide Prevention Coordinator in every VA hospital; improve rural Veterans' access to mental health care by increasing the number of locations at which Veterans can access VA telehealth; strengthen support and assistance for Servicemembers transitioning out of the military by automatically giving them one full year of VA health care when they leave the military; will hold the VA accountable for its mental health care and suicide prevention efforts; and, this legislation will mandate research into the nature of opioids and benzodiazepines in relation to Veteran deaths by suicide. There is insufficient research into the effects of these medications on high-risk Veterans, and it is time for Servicemembers and Veterans struggling against suicide to receive the best therapeutics and have access to multiple methodologies for recovery.

The accountability this legislation brings, the flexibility it provides to Veterans and Servicemembers, the ease of transition it provides in seamless benefits, and the new paths forward it will find through mandated research into therapies and their effects on those fighting against suicide will bring hope to Veterans and Servicemembers and make serious headway in the fight against Veteran suicide. On behalf of the Special Operations Association of America and the Veterans and Servicemembers we serve, we fully support S. 785, *Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019*.

Daniel Elkins  
Executive Director  
Special Operations Association of America