

The Honorable Cory Booker
U.S. Senate
717 Hart Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Rand Paul
U.S. Senate
167 Russell Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

November 16, 2022

Dear Senators Cory Booker and Rand Paul,

On behalf of the eighteen undersigned Veteran organizations, who are dedicated to advocating for and serving our Nation's past, present, and future Special Operations Forces (SOF), their families, and our SOF allies, we would like to express our support for the "*Breakthrough Therapies Act*."

The number of estimated daily Veteran deaths by suicide ranges from 16 to as many as 44, depending on the report. The precise number is impossible to determine, as there is no way to distinguish all deaths as intentional versus accidental or unintentional harm (e.g., overdoses). Male Veterans of the U.S. military are two to three times as likely to die by suicide than their civilian counterparts, and female Veterans are at even greater risk (six times the suicide rate than that of their female civilians). The risk of suicide is escalated among the SOF community. According to a USSOCOM report made available through the Freedom of Information Act, the rate of SOF Veteran deaths by suicide are 30 percent higher than the general Veteran population.¹ These concerning statistics make clear that there is a health crisis in our Veteran community.

This unfortunate reality highlights the limitations of effective pharmacologic treatments and therapies in our toolbox for stress and trauma-related concerns such as post-traumatic stress (PTS), major depressive disorder (MDD), and suicidality. There are only two FDA-approved medications indicated for PTS, both selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), and the landscape of effective treatment is even bleaker for suicidal thoughts and behaviors. These traditional medications have significant limitations and side effects, show limited efficacy, and are slow-acting with a delayed onset of action, meaning it can take weeks to months before Veterans experience any clinical benefit. This latency period is decidedly troubling, as it significantly increases the risk of a Veteran's death by suicide, or self-harm, and the exacerbation of substance use disorders through self-medication with drugs and alcohol.

FDA trials have demonstrated that the potential of fast-acting, alternative therapy models, which rapidly promote structural and functional neural plasticity, have great potential to treat Veterans struggling with PTS, MDD, traumatic brain injury (TBI), substance use disorders, and suicidality. FDA has classified such promising therapeutics as "breakthrough" therapeutics, meaning they have passed Phase 1 FDA trials and demonstrate considerable efficacy over and above any currently available FDA-approved therapeutic. However, these breakthrough therapeutics are currently restricted due to their current DEA scheduling which precludes Veterans from accessing these treatments within the United States.

Growing awareness and hope in these alternative therapies among SOF Veterans are inspiring more and more to forego VA medical care and entrust themselves to the less-regulated hands of foreign caregivers, which is not only financially burdensome for SOF Veterans, but also involves higher risk.

¹<https://www.socom.mil/FOIA/Documents/Psychological%20Autopsy%20Study%20of%20Suicides%20among%20United%20States%20Special%20Operations%20Forces.pdf>

Recent testimony from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to the House Veterans Affairs Committee states, “among the average 17.2 Veteran suicides per day...10.4 per day were among Veterans with no Veterans Health Administration (VHA) encounter in 2018 or 2019.”² There are multiple life-saving advantages for Veterans who remain actively engaged in VHA care, and the rates of death by suicide among Veterans within VHA care versus those outside VHA care indicate as much. Listening to our Special Operations Forces Veterans about which treatments are effective, and ensuring these treatments are available to them within U.S. borders and under our care, is paramount to combating Veteran deaths by suicide.

It is in consideration of these data that we wholeheartedly support the “*Breakthrough Therapies Act*.” This legislation will remove the current barriers between Special Operations Forces Veterans and the groundbreaking, life-saving treatments they need. Further, the “*Breakthrough Therapies Act*” will personally serve SOF Veterans who are in need of acute medical assistance due to Post-Traumatic Stress, a Traumatic Brain Injury, or struggles with suicidality, and will ensure they receive the care they deserve from the nation they fought for.

Once again, we thank you for this opportunity to advocate on behalf of our members of the SOF community and support the “*Breakthrough Therapies Act*.” We look forward to working with your offices to honor the sacrifices of these brave men and women and provide them hope in the face of a hopeless situation.

AfgFree
Flanders Fields
Freedom Bird Foundation
Heart of an Ace
The Lifeline Foundation
NMRG Rescue Project
Operation Recovery
Operation Sacred Promise
Operation 620
Project Exodus Revelation
Special Operations Association of America
Rule20
Save Our Allies
Task Force Argo
Task Force Diablo
Task Force North Star
Task Force Pineapple
Ukraine NGO Coordination Network

² <https://www.cdc.gov/washington/testimony/2022/t20220615.htm>