

No. R-202. Joint resolution relating to military suicides.

(J.R.H.8)

Offered by: Representatives Higley of Lowell and Strong of Albany

Whereas, according to a January 16, 2015, report in the publication *Military Times*, nearly two-thirds of the military personnel who committed suicide in 2013 had seen a doctor within three months before taking their own lives, but fewer than one-half had a mental health diagnosis, and fewer than one-third expressed any intention to hurt themselves, and

Whereas, according to an August 2014 dispatch from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), 8,000 veterans commit suicide annually, and this averages to 22 per day, and

Whereas, the General Assembly acknowledges and appreciates the VA's efforts to increase its resources for mental health counseling and support, including working to improve access to these services for veterans who meet the national criteria and who live more than 40 miles from a VA medical facility, and

Whereas, the VA has a toll-free military crisis line (1-800-273-8255) and website (veteranscrisisline.net) that are accessible 24 hours per day, seven days per week to service members and families for suicide prevention purposes, and

Whereas, despite the VA's and the U.S. Department of Defense's (DOD) suicide prevention efforts, including Congress's recent adoption of the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act, the suicide rate for our men and women who have served in the U.S. Armed Forces remains far too high, and

Whereas, military families have expressed concerns about the consistent staffing of crisis lines, access to therapy options and effective medications, as well as delays in obtaining mental health counseling appointments, and

Whereas, the DOD's anti-stigma campaign, "Real Warriors, Real Battles, Real Strength," features real service members who have reached out for support or sought treatment for invisible wounds and are continuing to maintain successful military and civilian careers, now therefore be it

Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives:

That the General Assembly recognizes the need for greater public awareness of the military and veteran suicide rate, and be it further

Resolved: That the General Assembly supports the continued efforts of the VA, DOD, the Vermont National Guard, Vermont Vet-to-Vet, and other public and private organizations to address mental health issues, and be it further

Resolved: That the General Assembly supports the Vermont Veterans Legal Assistance Project in its work helping veterans review and appeal unfavorable discharges, possibly due to behavioral problems related to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI) or both, in order to qualify for, or gain access to, VA services, and be it further

Resolved: That the General Assembly supports that federal policies be established under the authority of the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act as follows:

- (1) establish, support, and enhance peer support outreach programs for veterans; and
- (2) train mental health counselors around military acronyms and situations specific to military life to help the veteran feel more comfortable when being treated for a mental health issue, and be it further

Resolved: That the General Assembly requests that the Secretary of Veteran Affairs designate Vermont as one of the five pilot program locations identified in the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act, and be it further

Resolved: That the General Assembly strongly encourages the Armed Forces and VA to establish, support and enhance peer support outreach programs for the families of veterans, and be it further

Resolved: That the General Assembly strongly encourages the U.S. Armed Forces to require a period of reintegration for returning veterans that maintains unit cohesion, and be it further

Resolved: That the General Assembly urges the Vermont National Guard to increase educational efforts related to mental health care services in order to reduce both the existing stigma among military personnel and veterans to seek mental health assistance and to lower future suicide rates, and be it further

Resolved: That the Secretary of State be directed to send a copy of this resolution to U.S. Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert A. McDonald, U.S. Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, the Vermont Congressional Delegation, Commissioner of Mental Health Paul Dupre, Vermont Adjutant and Inspector General Major General Steven A. Cray, and to the Vermont Office of Veterans Affairs.