

The House “Invisible Wounds Caucus” Seeks Solutions

Washington, DC –This week, Congressman Tim Walz (D-MN) and Congressman Phil Roe (R-TN) held a bipartisan panel discussion with experts seeking potential solutions for military and veteran suicides. The discussion was sponsored by the Invisible Wounds Caucus in the House of Representatives, whose goals are to promote more awareness of wounds like traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder, and substance abuse as well as to promote effective treatments.

“One military or veteran suicide is too many for those who answered the call to duty,” said Walz.

“These tragedies are preventable and effective treatments are available. We can and must give military personnel and veterans who are in crisis the comprehensive support they need. We can and must provide those who are struggling with a sense of hope and a path forward towards a high quality of life.”

Suicide has become an epidemic amongst veterans, especially those returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2009 suicide was cited as the third leading cause of death among Army personnel. Since Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom began, more than 1,100 service members have been lost to suicide. When combined with accidental deaths caused by high-risk behavior often associated with mental health issues (e.g. alcoholism and drug abuse), more service members’ die from suicide than from combat.

Sadly, while military suicides have received much attention in the last several years, this problem has only intensified. In July 2012 more Army personnel committed suicide than at any other point in recent history, with a rate of more than one per day. The other services have reported high rates of suicide as well.

This disturbing trend of self-harm has been even worse amongst veterans—in 2010 the Veterans Administration estimated that 18 veterans committed suicide *per day*. Needless to say this is an epidemic amongst the uniformed and veteran communities.

Terri Tanielian, co-editor of the RAND Corporation's 2008 "Invisible Wounds of War" study, moderated the expert panel with Lieutenant General (USA-Retired) Hugh Smith; Dr. M. David Rudd, Co-Founder and Scientific Director of the National Center for Veteran Studies; Kristy Kaufmann, Executive Director, Code of Support Foundation; and in attendance was Mike Jones, co-founder and executive director of the suicide-prevention organization Not Alone.

Last October, Congressman Walz travelled as a member of Congressman Roe's bi-partisan Congressional Delegation to view the progress and follow the journey home our American service men and women travel when they become injured, especially those with invisible wounds. Walz noted at the time the improvements the U.S. military in Afghanistan had made in caring for soldiers who suffered invisible injuries of the brain. Walz attributed the improvements to research, better identification and early treatment.

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