

September 10, 2020

The Honorable Mark Takano
Chairman
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Phil Roe
Ranking Member
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Takano, and Ranking Member Roe:

We, the undersigned 24 healthcare professionals and academics write in strong support of H.R. 8084, the Lethal Means Safety Training Act. As we recognize Suicide Prevention Awareness Week, we ask that you prioritize suicide prevention for our nation's veterans, which includes prioritizing lethal means safety.

Veteran suicide is a public health crisis that is currently on the rise in the United States. More veterans died by suicide from 2005-2017 than the number of U.S. troops who died in 30 years of war in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The crisis of veteran suicide has become even more pressing as COVID-19 continues to spread unchecked, and as risk factors such as social isolation and unemployment are exacerbated.

While there is no one cause of suicide among veterans, conclusive research finds that access to lethal means, especially firearms, increases the risk of suicide. Firearms are the most lethal suicide attempt method, with 9 out of 10 suicide attempts involving firearms resulting in death. In comparison, the most frequently chosen methods of suicide attempt, such as poisoning and cutting/piercing, result in death in less than 3% of attempts. Research shows that access to a gun in the home increases the risk of suicide more than three-fold. Notably, veterans are more likely than their civilian counterparts to use firearms in suicide attempts and 70% of all suicides by veterans involve firearms, while nationally, firearms are used in half of all suicides. Thus, if we want to address veteran suicide, we must address firearm suicide.

We want to be clear that while firearm ownership does not necessarily increase suicidal ideation, access to firearms increases the risk of death by suicide. We understand and respect that firearms are an important component of military culture. However, respectfully dealing with firearms in a suicide prevention context is imperative for suicide prevention, and lethal means safety counseling training can help accomplish that.

Lethal means safety counseling is a healthcare intervention that can be used to help prevent suicide by giving healthcare providers the tools they need to (1) determine if a person at risk for suicide has access to lethal means, like firearms; and (2) work with the person and their family or friends to reduce access to those lethal means until the suicidal risk decreases. Healthcare providers use lethal means safety counseling to work alongside their patients to find mutually-agreeable, culturally respectful solutions that temporarily reduce access to firearms and in turn, reduce their risk of suicide. Temporarily reducing access to firearms is an evidence-based suicide prevention intervention as many suicidal crises are short-lived, lasting only minutes or hours. Reducing access

to firearms during suicidal crises makes it more likely that the person will either delay or survive a suicide attempt, as other means of suicide are far less lethal.

Lethal means safety counseling in the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is not new. Indeed, the VA encourages providers who interact with veterans at risk for suicide to routinely assess for access to lethal means and promotes the use of safety plans for veterans who are at risk for suicide. Currently, primary care and mental health professionals in the VA are trained in lethal means safety counseling. While this is critically important, we know this is not enough as the majority of veterans don't use Veteran Health Administration (VHA) services and the majority of veteran suicide decedents did not recently receive VHA services prior to their death. This is why it is imperative that lethal means safety counseling training is provided to professionals who routinely see veterans but are outside the VHA as well, including by Community Care Network providers and compensation and pension examiners.

We were pleased to see that President Trump's President's Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End a National Tragedy of Suicide (PREVENTS) interagency task force to end veteran suicide included recommendations on lethal means safety. Specifically, PREVENTS includes a recommendation to, "increase implementation of programs focused on lethal means safety." H.R. 8084 would turn this recommendation into action by not only updating the VA's current Lethal Means Safety and Suicide Prevention training course to ensure it is culturally appropriate and is based on best practices, but it would also expand who receives the training to ensure all professionals who are in routine contact with veterans are trained.

Suicide is a public health crisis, but it doesn't have to be this way. The Lethal Means Safety Training Act can make a difference. We encourage you to swiftly pass this life-saving piece of legislation.

Sincerely,

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