

SAV Act Clears Senate

VFW says more suicide prevention improvements still needed

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WASHINGTON — The Senate today passed H.R. 203, the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans (SAV) Act, which will help incentivize more psychiatrists to work at Department of Veterans Affairs medical facilities, to expand VA's successful peer support networks, and to authorize VA to collaborate with local nonprofit mental health organizations. The bill now moves to the White House for the president's signature.

"We are thankful that the SAV Act takes these important steps, but more still needs to be done to help prevent military and veteran suicides," said John W. Stroud, the national commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States.

Mental health and suicide prevention have been top VFW legislative priorities for years, according to Stroud, whose organization has pushed consistently for reforms like improved peer-to-peer counseling, telemedicine, increased mental health staffing, and enlisting alternative treatment options in both the military and VA health care systems, as well as from the civilian community. However, a major concern is that some service members are being kicked out of the military for so-called preexisting conditions without first being properly diagnosed or treated, meaning they could easily be denied critical VA care and benefits after they are discharged.

The VFW worked closely with the bill's architects, House VA Committee Chairman Jeff Miller (R-Fla.) and Rep. Tim Walz (D-Minn.), to include provisions that would improve mental health partnerships with Reserve Components, and to review less-than-honorable discharges, the cause of which could have been induced by post-traumatic stress associated with military service. Those improvements ended up being dropped from the original bill when it was introduced near the end of the 113th Congress, where it stalled in the Senate. That same bill was reintroduced into the new Congress where it was passed, but again without the VFW-supported provisions.

"We are hopeful that the president will soon sign the Clay Hunt SAV Act," said Stroud, "because it does strengthen and expand the mental health programs and services currently

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available to service members and veterans. What the SAV Act doesn't do is go far enough, which are provisions we will work with Congress to insert into the next suicide prevention legislation."