

## Wounded Warrior Project Submits Statement for the Record on Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act

### **H.R. 5059 Debated in Congress Today**

**Washington, D.C. (November 19, 2014)** – Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP) today submitted a statement for the record in support of H.R. 5059, the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act (SAV Act), which was debated this afternoon in the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs' Subcommittee on Health. The SAV Act seeks to combat the scourge of mental health injuries – the invisible wounds of war – that face this generation of injured veterans, particularly post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injury (TBI).

The SAV Act would improve mental health care and services and suicide prevention programs at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Department of Defense (DoD) in several ways. Among its provisions, the bill would:

- Amend the requirements for reviewing the discharge characterizations of individuals diagnosed with [PTSD or a TBI](#);
- Authorize VA to conduct a student loan repayment pilot program aimed at recruiting and retaining psychiatrists; and
- Establish a [peer support](#) and community outreach pilot program to assist transitioning service members with accessing VA mental health care services.

“While VA has made efforts to identify and treat mental health issues through several initiatives, we know that many veterans with mental health conditions are still not receiving the care they need,” said Charlie Abell, executive vice president of Policy and Government Affairs at WWP. “Removing the barriers that lead warriors to drop out of therapy is critical to reversing the heartbreaking rise of suicides among veterans.”

Since 2010, WWP has been using the information gathered from its [Annual Alumni Survey](#) to refine its existing programs, develop new initiatives, and identify gaps in existing services and support. This year's data again showed that mental health conditions were among the most frequently reported health problems of Alumni: 75 percent reported experiencing PTSD, 67 percent reported depression, and 64 percent reported experiencing anxiety. Forty-three percent of Alumni reported experiencing a TBI. Overall, the survey results indicate that, for many, the effects of mental and emotional health problems can be even more serious than the effects of physical problems.

WWP has seen the success that peer support and community outreach can have through our Peer Support Program and Peer-Facilitated Support Groups, and we know that in many cases, it takes a veteran to help a veteran. The provision that would establish a peer support and community outreach pilot program to assist transitioning service members with accessing VA mental health care services is particularly encouraging in light of a survey finding that showed 59 percent of respondents identified talking with another OEF/OIF veteran as a top resource for coping with stress.

“We applaud Congressman Tim Walz (D-MN) for introducing this important piece of legislation and for his outstanding leadership on this critical issue for injured servicemen and women,” Abell said. “Expanding the breadth of treatment to include greater engagement, increasing family-based interventions, understanding the reasons for negative perceptions of mental health care, and meeting veterans where they are is crucial in combating the stigma and organization barriers to mental health care. We believe these provisions in the Clay

Hunt SAV Act would serve injured servicemen and women well as they battle their invisible wounds now and in the future. We encourage the Subcommittee's support for this bill."

WWP would also like to thank Senator John McCain (R-AZ) for introducing the companion bill to the Clay Hunt SAV Act (S.2930). While it is encouraging to see a provision that creates a pilot program for loan repayment for psychiatrists joining the VA, it is disappointing to see the Senate bill omit critical provisions of the House-drafted bill. To effectively meet the needs of wounded veterans, this bill should include provisions that combat veteran suicide through a review of other-than-honorable discharges and create a peer support and community outreach pilot program. WWP will continue to fight for these important provisions and lobby the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee to add them to S.2930.

### **About Wounded Warrior Project**

Wounded Warrior Project is recognizing its ten-year anniversary, reflecting on a decade of service and reaffirming its commitment to serving injured veterans for their lifetime. The mission of Wounded Warrior Project is to honor and empower Wounded Warriors. WWP currently serves more than 59,000 warriors and nearly 8,500 family members through its 20 unique programs and services. The purpose of WWP is to raise awareness and to enlist the public's aid for the needs of injured service members, to help injured servicemen and women aid and assist each other, and to provide unique, direct programs and services to meet their needs. WWP is a national organization headquartered in Jacksonville, Florida. To get involved and learn more, visit [woundedwarriorproject.org](http://woundedwarriorproject.org).

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