

The Florida Senate
BILL ANALYSIS AND FISCAL IMPACT STATEMENT

(This document is based on the provisions contained in the legislation as of the latest date listed below.)

Prepared By: The Professional Staff of the Committee on Military and Veterans Affairs, Space, and Domestic Security

BILL: SM 302

INTRODUCER: Senator Burgess

SUBJECT: Recognizing Veteran Suicide

DATE: November 29, 2021 REVISED: _____

	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR	REFERENCE	ACTION
1.	Brown	Caldwell	MS	Favorable
2.			RC	

I. Summary:

SM 302 is a memorial to the Congress of the United States, urging Congress to recognize the epidemic of suicide among veterans and to fully fund suicide prevention activities of the United States Department of Veterans Affairs.

Both state and national statistics show a greater than 40 percent higher rate of suicide among veterans compared to the general population.

The memorial requires copies to be dispatched to the President of the United States, the President of the U.S. Senate, the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, and to each member of the Florida delegation of the U.S. Congress.

A memorial is an official legislative document addressed to Congress, the President of the United States, or some other governmental entity that expresses the will of the Legislature on a matter within the jurisdiction of the recipient. A memorial requires passage by both legislative houses but does not require the Governor’s approval nor is it subject to a veto.

II. Present Situation:

Veteran Population and Demographics

As of 2017, 20 million veterans live in the United States, of which nearly 2 million are women.¹ Only about half of veterans nationally receive or access at least one benefit from the Veterans Administration.²

¹ U.S. Dep’t of Veterans Affairs, *National Strategy for Preventing Veteran Suicide, 2018-2028*, available at https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention/docs/Office-of-Mental-Health-and-Suicide-Prevention-National-Strategy-for-Preventing-Veterans-Suicide.pdf (pg. 5).

² *Id.*

Third to only California and Texas, Florida has more than 1.5 million veterans.³ Of these:

- 1.17 million are wartime veterans;
- 350,000 are peacetime veterans;
- 31,000 are World War II veterans;
- 105,000 are Korean War veterans;
- 498,000 are Vietnam-era veterans;
- 188,000 are Gulf War veterans; and
- 177,494 are Post-9/11 veterans.⁴

Mental Health of Veterans

Veterans are known to have higher levels of mental distress than non-veterans. In a 2014 study, almost 1 in 4 veterans showed symptoms of mental illness.⁵ Predominant mental health diagnoses among veterans are:

- Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) at a rate of 15 times that of the general population;
- Depression at a rate of 5 times that of the general population; and
- Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI).⁶

Veterans who have a diagnosable mental health illness are at a much higher risk of suicide than veterans without mental illness. A 2017 study of Veterans Health Administration patients (VHA) shows a more than double rate of suicide among veterans with a mental health or substance use disorder than persons without these diagnoses.⁷

Substance Use Disorder by Veterans

Substance use is considered to constitute a substance use disorder if the:

Recurrent use of alcohol and/or drugs causes clinically significant impairment, including health problems, disability, and failure to meet major responsibilities at work, school, or home.⁸

Substance use disorder is marked among veterans, the most prevalent being alcohol binge drinking and at a higher rate of use than by non-veterans.⁹ The rate of illegal drug use, primarily marijuana (marijuana use for recreational purposes is still illegal in most states) is about the same

³ Florida Dep't of Veterans' Affairs, *Fast Facts*, available at <https://www.floridavets.org/our-veterans/profilefast-facts/> (last visited Oct. 21, 2021).

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ National Institute on Mental Illness (NAMI); *Veterans & Active Duty* (pg. 1), available at <https://www.nami.org/Your-Journey/Veterans-Active-Duty> (last visited Oct. 25, 2021).

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ The rate of suicide among VHA patients with mental health illness at the time of the study was 57 patients per 100,000. Rand Corporation, *Suicide Among Veterans/Veterans' Issues in Focus*, available at <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA1363-1.html> (last visited Oct. 22, 2021) (pg. 4).

⁸ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Dep't of Health and Human Services, *Mental Health and Substance Use Disorders*, available at <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disorders> (last visited Oct. 25, 2021).

⁹ National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI), U.S. National Library of Medicine, *Substance Use Disorders in Military Veterans: Prevalence and Treatment Challenges*, available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5587184/> (pg. 3).

for veterans and the general population.¹⁰ Despite efforts by the VHA and other agencies in recent decades to reduce substance use disorder among veterans, rates continue to increase.¹¹ This is especially so for prescription opioid use.¹² Substance use disorder is correlated to medical ailments, other psychiatric disorders, relationship and employment impairment, and increased rates of suicidal ideation, attempts, and completion.¹³ In a study on military personnel, researchers found that 30 percent of suicides were preceded by alcohol or drug use, while 20 percent of high-risk behavior deaths were attributed to alcohol or drug overdose.¹⁴

Military Sexual Trauma

Military sexual trauma is an occurrence or occurrences of sexual harassment or sexual assault that has taken place during military service.¹⁵ Researchers have found a clear association between military sexual trauma and suicide.¹⁶ Early data finds that 1 of 4 survivors of military sexual trauma report non-suicidal self-injury.¹⁷ Relatedly, non-suicidal self-injury correlates to suicidal ideation, planning, and attempts.¹⁸

Suicide Rates Attributed to Service During Post 9/11 Conflict

An estimated cumulative 7,057 servicemembers have died in service throughout the Post 9/11 era. A much higher rate of 30,000 active duty personnel and veterans who previously served during the Post-9/11 era have died by suicide, or 4 times as many that died in service.¹⁹ Identified causes vary.

There are clear contributors to suicidal ideation like high exposure to trauma [(mental, physical, moral, and sexual),] stress and burnout, the influence of the military's hegemonic masculine culture, continued access to guns, and the difficulty of reintegrating into civilian life. ... [W]e must also examine unique elements of the U.S. post-9/11 wars. ... [W]e have seen a tremendous rise of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in warfare, significantly increasing the number of traumatic brain injuries (TBIs), and polytrauma cases among service members.²⁰

¹⁰ *Id.* at 4.

¹¹ *Id.* at 2.

¹² *Id.* at 4.

¹³ *Id.* at 2.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ U.S. Dep't of Veterans Affairs, *Military Sexual Trauma -- A Risk Factor for Suicide*, available at https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention/docs/Literature-Review-Military-Sexual-Trauma-CLEARED-3-5-19.pdf.

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ Thomas Howard Suitt, III, Watson Institute, International & Public Affairs, Brown University, *High Suicide Rates among United States Service Members and Veterans of the Post-9/11 Wars*, available at https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2021/Suitt_Suicides_Costs%20of%20War_June%2021%202021.pdf (June 21, 2021) (pgs. 1, 3).

²⁰ *Id.* at 3-4.

As many as 20 percent of post-9/11 servicemembers have experienced TBI's, with many exposed to repetitive damage.²¹

Suicide Rates Disparity between Veterans and Non-Veterans

From the latest data reported for 2019, 553 veterans died by suicide in Florida, 524 men and 29 women, while nationally, 6,261 veterans died by suicide.²² Suicide rates are highest among the youngest veterans, aged 18-29 years of age.²³ In comparing suicide rates between the veteran and non-veteran population, in 2019 the rate of suicide by the general population in Florida is 19.6 per 100,000 persons while that for Florida veterans, is 35.7.²⁴ A similar disparity applies at the national level, 18.0 per 100,000 for the general population and 31.6 for veterans.²⁵ More than 70 percent of the time, a firearm was used to die by suicide.²⁶

That the Covid pandemic contributed to a significant increase in feelings of loss, anxiety, and depression is well-documented.²⁷ Lesser known is the impact of the pandemic on suicide and if there is one, any changes that occur over a period of time. Also unknown at this time is whether the marked disparity in rates of suicide between veterans and non-veterans will trend differently in coming years.

Suicide Intervention Programs

Suicide prevention is a top clinical priority of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. In 2018, the department implemented a 10-year strategy for preventing veteran suicide.²⁸ This approach to suicide prevention involves a veteran's family, peers, and community. The plan also includes specific outreach to veterans who do not access services of the VA.²⁹

Initiatives include:

- Enhancing mental health services for veterans who are women;
- Broadening telehealth;
- Developing free-of-charge mobile applications for veterans and their families;
- Improving access to mental health care; and
- Helping families of veterans by telephone.³⁰

²¹ *Id.* at 4.

²² U.S. Dep't of Veterans Affairs, *Florida Veteran Suicide Data Sheet, 2019*, available at <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2019/2019-State-Data-Sheet-Florida-508.pdf>.

²³ U.S. Dep't of Veterans Affairs, *National Strategy for Preventing Veteran Suicide, 2018-2028*, *supra* note 1 at 7.

²⁴ U.S. Dep't of Veterans Affairs, *Florida Veteran Suicide Data Sheet, 2019*, *supra* note 22.

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ KFF, *The Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Use* (Feb. 10, 2021), available at <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/> (last visited Nov. 3, 2021).

²⁸ U.S. Dep't of Veterans Affairs, *National Strategy for Preventing Veteran Suicide, 2018-2028*, *supra* note 1.

²⁹ *Id.* at 1.

³⁰ *Id.* at 11.

In implementing its plans, the VA partners with other government agencies and organizations at both the national and local level to share information and training on suicide prevention.³¹ To reach suicide prevention at the state level, the VA, along with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration (SAMHSA), initiated the “Governor’s Challenge to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans, and their Families.”³² The goal of this program is to implement a uniform comprehensive suicide prevention plan, from the national to the state level. To date, 35 states have joined the challenge.³³ Florida is a member.³⁴

The Veterans COMPACT Act of 2020 enables the Veterans Administration to implement programs providing mental health assistance to transitioning servicemembers and improving services for veterans who are women. The law also authorizes a non-VA facility to get reimbursed for providing a veteran emergent suicide care.³⁵

Most recently, in November 2021, the White House unveiled a plan to advance a comprehensive, cross-sector, evidence-based strategy for reducing suicide rates among servicemembers and veterans.³⁶ This plan adds several priority goals to the existing and ongoing comprehensive plan, which are:

- Improving lethal means safety, by inserting time and distance between a person in crisis and access to lethal means, such as a firearm or medication;
- Enhancing crisis care and facilitating care transitions, including stabilization services;
- Increasing access to and delivery of evidence-based treatment;
- Addressing upstream risk (leading up to crisis) and protective factors in furthering prevention efforts; and
- Bridging interagency coordination.³⁷

Memorial

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³¹ *Id.*

³² U.S. Dep’t of Veterans Affairs, *2021 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Report* (Sept. 2021) (pg. 13), available at <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2021/2021-National-Veteran-Suicide-Prevention-Annual-Report-FINAL-9-8-21.pdf>.

³³ *Id.* at 14.

³⁴ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), U.S.. Dep’t of Health & Human Services, *Governor’s and Mayor’s Challenges to Prevent Suicide Among Servicemembers, Veterans, and their Families*, available at <https://www.samhsa.gov/smvf-ta-center/mayors-governors-challenges> (last visited Nov. 5, 2021).

³⁵ Veterans COMPACT Act of 2020 (Pub. L. No. 116-214).

³⁶ The White House, *Reducing Military and Veteran Suicide: Advancing a Comprehensive, Cross-sector, Evidence-informed Public Health Strategy*, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Military-and-Veteran-Suicide-Prevention-Strategy.pdf>

³⁷ *Id.* at 8-9.

III. Effect of Proposed Changes:

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IV. Constitutional Issues:**A. Municipality/County Mandates Restrictions:**

None.

B. Public Records/Open Meetings Issues:

None.

C. Trust Funds Restrictions:

None.

D. State Tax or Fee Increases:

None.

E. Other Constitutional Issues:

None identified.

V. Fiscal Impact Statement:**A. Tax/Fee Issues:**

None.

B. Private Sector Impact:

None.

C. Government Sector Impact:

None.

VI. Technical Deficiencies:

None.

VII. Related Issues:

None.

VIII. Statutes Affected:

None.

IX. Additional Information:

A. Committee Substitute – Statement of Changes:

(Summarizing differences between the Committee Substitute and the prior version of the bill.)

None.

B. Amendments:

None.