



Testimony in Support of HB 1791
Veterans' Behavioral Health Services Grant Matching Fund
House Health, Welfare and Institutions Committee
Dennis C. Alexander, Director of Government Relations & Advocacy
Easterseals DC MD VA
January 17, 2023

Chair Orrock and Members of the Committee:

I come before you today to speak in support of HB 1791, a bill that would establish the Veterans' Behavioral Health Services Grant Matching Fund. This bill would ensure that behavioral health providers who serve veterans, service members, and their families have adequate resources to provide these critical services by creating a matching grant program for community-based behavioral health clinics that serve veterans, active service members, and their families.

Easterseals DC MD VA is leading the way to full equity, inclusion, and access through direct and life-changing disability and community services. Since 1945, we have worked tirelessly to enhance quality of life and expand access to healthcare, education, and employment. Each year we help thousands of veterans, active-duty service members and their families and see the critical need for mental healthcare to prevent suicide, keep families whole, and enable careers.

There are more than 700,000 veterans living in Virginia, with the largest concentration living in the Northern Virginia and the Hampton Roads areas. Unfortunately, veterans are disproportionately affected by behavioral health concerns, as well as unemployment, housing, and financial issues. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, we have witnessed a 30% increase in the number of clients reporting thoughts of suicide and a 27% increase in requests for services. A very high percentage of military families continued to work in-person during the pandemic because of the essential nature of their work. In addition, they faced permanent change of station under the most stressful conditions imaginable, saw spouses leave their employment in order to facilitate virtual schooling, and struggled as single parents during the pandemic with a deployed spouse.

The need for behavioral health services among veterans, service members and their families in Virginia is critical. In our service territory of Northern Virginia, 19% of veterans suffer from Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), 16% from Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), and 6% from suicide ideation. In 2020, the national suicide rate for veterans was 57.3% higher than that of non-veteran adults.¹ Perhaps most troubling, 62.5% of veterans who take their own life are not under the care of the Veterans Administration (VA) at the time of their death.

We are all aware that the current capacity of government agencies cannot adequately address the behavioral health needs of our veterans and service members. There are often long waiting

¹ National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report (US Dept. of Veterans Affairs, Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention), September 2022

periods to get services at VA facilities; depending on their discharge status, veterans may not be eligible to be seen by the VA, and family members of veterans are not served by the VA. For the family members of active-duty military, the number of providers who accept military insurance may be limited, resulting in long waits for services. In addition, many healthcare providers may not have military cultural competency, especially in regard to female veterans, which is the fastest growing demographic in the military.

With the support of funding from this bill, community-based organizations like the Easterseals can provide the critical services to enhance available treatment resources and reduce the barriers to care. We must all work together to achieve zero veteran suicides, keep military families whole, and ensure veterans are mentally strong so they can secure and retain meaningful employment.

HB 1791 is an important opportunity to honor the service of veterans and their families as they seek to reintegrate into society and contribute to their communities. A vote in favor of HB 1791 will change and save the lives of more veterans, their families, and the families of active-duty service members in Virginia by providing needed support for the many nonprofit organizations serving this population.