

HOUSE BILL 605 – SUPPORT

**House Bill 605 – Veterans – Behavioral Health Services – Mental Health First Aid
House Health and Government Operations Committee
February 9, 2021**

My name is Brian Smith. I am a post-9/11 combat Veteran, I have PTSD, I have lost friends to the scourge of Veteran suicide, and I am here today to offer my **support for House Bill 605**.

Last year when a Veteran friend took his life, he left friends, family, and two unanswered questions asked by many that knew him. “How could I have known?” and “what could I have done?”. Thus, the challenge and the solution are rooted in knowledge and empowerment.

As you know, this legislation implements a Mental Health First Aid program for Veterans and their families. This training program will enable Veterans and their immediate family members to identify and respond to signs of mental illness and substance abuse disorders.

Why is this so important?

- 2.7 million service members have been to the war zones of Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001, and **over half of them have deployed more than once...over 400,000 have completed three or more deployments...**
- At least **970,000 of these Veterans**, over one third, have some degree of officially recognized disability as a result of the wars.
- The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration estimates that **almost 20% of Service members** returning from Iraq and Afghanistan **have post-traumatic stress disorder** – that’s nearly **500,000 Veterans!**
- 20 Veterans die by suicide each day.

Many times that number of Americans have borne the costs of war as spouses, parents, children, and friends that cope with their loved ones’ absence, mourn their deaths, or greet the changed person who often returns.

Many Iraq and Afghanistan veterans face a life of disability due to the physical and psychological injuries they sustain in the war zones. Many more live with physical and emotional scars despite lack of disability status.

Sadly, due to the stigma, many Veterans with mental health problems do not seek help or delay seeking help. Even when people decide to get help, it’s frequently after many years of delay. The longer a person waits to seek help, the more difficult their recovery can be. All too often, these Veterans take their lives.

Mental Health First Aid provides effective awareness and action-oriented training that can help address this mental health crisis, and it is widely applicable beyond the Veteran community.

As for those two questions.

“How could I have known?” This training provides awareness of mental health warning signs.

“What could I have done?” This training provides actionable recommendations on effectively connecting Veterans with the appropriate professional caregivers.

What can we do here today to fight for our Veterans’ lives? Move this bill forward!

I respectfully request a favorable report for House Bill 605.