



MARYLAND MILITARY COALITION

*Serving Veterans through Legislative
Advocacy*

April 2, 2024

The Honorable Joseline Pena-Melnyk
Health and Government Operations Committee
Room 241
House Office Building,
Annapolis, MD 21401

**Subject: Request for a FAVORABLE Report - SB 615 - General Provisions –
Commemorative Days – Maryland Veterans Suicide Awareness Day**

Dear Chair Pena-Melnyk and Members of the House Health and Government Operations Committee:

On behalf of the Maryland Military Coalition and as its Communications Director, I write to recommend a FAVORABLE report by the Committee on **SB 615 - General Provisions – Commemorative Days – Maryland Veterans Suicide Awareness Day**, sponsored by Senator Simonaire, Ready, Sallings, Jennings, Iam, Hershey, Hester, Gallion, Folden, Augustine, McKay, Jackson, Lewis-Young and Brooks—all members of the Veterans Caucus. I am grateful to all of you for this measure. I am a nurse and I currently serve on the Governor’s Challenge to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans and Families.

Suicide rates have been increasing for the past twenty years, but among active-duty personnel and veterans of the post-9/11 wars, the suicide rate is even higher, outpacing average Americans. Do you know that **FOUR times** as many active-duty personnel and war veterans of post-9/11 conflicts **have died of suicide rather than in combat**? These high suicide rates are caused by multiple factors, including risks inherent to fighting in any war such as high exposure to trauma, stress, the “military” culture and training, continued access to guns, and the difficulty of reintegrating into civilian life.

According to the Centers for Disease Control’s most recent data, **Maryland had 620 suicides in 2021¹; of which 89 were veterans².**

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [Suicide Mortality by State](#).

² U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, [State-Level Veteran Suicide Data](#): 2021 Update

Subject: **SB 615 - General Provisions – Commemorative Days – Maryland Veterans Suicide Awareness Day – Favorable**

Here are some **suicide statistics from the Department of Veteran Affairs**³

- In each year from 2001 through 2020, the age- and sex-adjusted suicide rates of Veterans **exceeded those of non-Veteran U.S. adults.**
- In 2020, there were **6,146 Veteran suicides.** The rate for Veterans was **57.3% higher than that of non-Veterans adults.**
- **Firearms accounted for 71% of those deaths.**
- Suicide was the **13th leading cause of death among Veterans** overall, and **the second leading cause of death among Veterans under age 45.**
- Yet we believe those suicide numbers are actually wrong—too low. A study, “Operation Deep Dive” determined that states actually **undercount veteran suicides by more than 37%**, and the “true numbers” could be as much as **2.4 times greater than the VA-reported suicide rate**⁴. They estimated that an additional 20 veterans die every day by **Self-Injury, where 80% were not coded as suicide but rather as an overdose.**
- More importantly, it is not only the veteran themselves that are at suicide risk, but also the family members who often endure the same antecedents of high stress, problems finding work and with finances, long deployments and single parenting.
- Finally, we are in a mental health crisis. In January, 2024, the Maryland Department of Health reported that the 9-8-8 Lifeline received 4,777 calls, a 107% increase in call volume since its inception in July, 2022.

Remember “22 a day”? Despite all that we have done to improve behavioral health services across Maryland and the Nation, the veteran rate of suicide is only down to **16.8 per day.**

Even ONE veteran suicide death is too much! Raising awareness of Veteran suicide helps.

Maryland is home to 34,444 active-duty service members, 14,292 active-duty spouses and 25,642 reservists/national guard members with 28,019 family members⁵. These are Department of Defense numbers only and do not include the 1,700 active-duty U.S. Public Health Service (PHS) members and the 7,000 PHS retirees and their families or the active duty and retired National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) service members who also live in Maryland. In addition, there are 355,787 veteran households⁶. **Maryland must continue to raise awareness about veteran suicide.**

I fully support the recommended amendments from Secretary Woods and the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs. Changing to “prevention” instead of awareness, supports the efforts of the Governor’s Challenge. Moving the commemorative day to September 30th aligns efforts with the timing of national Suicide Prevention programming.

³ U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, [2022 National Veteran Suicide Report](#).

⁴ [Operation Deep Dive Summary of Interim Report](#), September 22, 2022

⁵ [Military One Source](#), as of December 31, 2022

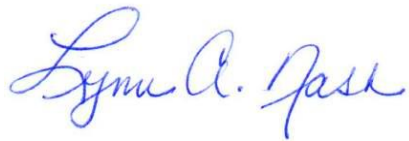
⁶ [VA Claim Insider](#), August 10, 2023

Subject: **SB 615 - General Provisions – Commemorative Days – Maryland Veterans Suicide Awareness Day – Favorable**

The Maryland Military Coalition, is a voluntary, non-partisan organization representing 21 veteran service organizations who, in turn, serve over 150,000 Maryland uniformed services men and women and their families. The Coalition *strongly supports* SB 615 - **General Provisions – Commemorative Days – Maryland Veterans Suicide Awareness Day** and asks for your **favorable report**.

We thank Senator Simonaire and the Veteran Caucus Co-Sponsors of this important legislation and for their continued support of the uniformed services community in Maryland.

Respectfully,



Lynn A. Nash, PhD, RN, PHCNS-BC, FAAN
CAPT (R), U.S. Public Health Service
Communications Director

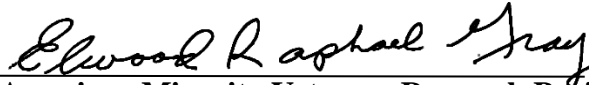
Attachment: Maryland Veteran Suicide Data Sheet, 2021

Maryland Military Coalition Member Organizations Follow

Member Organizations, Maryland Military Coalition


Air Force Sergeants Association

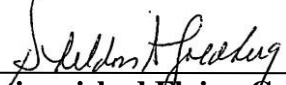

American Military Society


American Minority Veterans Research Project



Association of the United States Navy



Commissioned Officers Association of the
US Public Health Service


Disabled American Veterans


Distinguished Flying Cross Association


Fleet Reserve Association


Jewish War Veterans of the USA


Maryland Air National Guard Retirees'
Association


Maryland Veterans Chamber of Commerce


Military Officers Association of America


Military Order of the Purple Heart

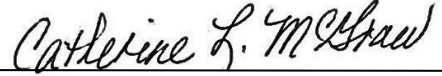

Montford Point Marines of America



National Association for Black Veterans


Naval Enlisted Reserve Association


NOAA Association of Commissioned Officers


Reserve Organization of America


Society of Military Widows


National Active and Retired Federal Employees
Veterans Affairs Directorate, NARFE MD


Veterans of Foreign Wars