



**Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs
Office of the Secretary**

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GOVERNOR**

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LT. GOVERNOR**

**ANTHONY C. WOODS
SECRETARY**

March 29, 2024

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

**SB615: General Provisions- Commemorative Days- Veteran Suicide Awareness Day
*Testimony***

Good morning Chair Pena-Melnyk, Vice Chair Cullison, and Members of the House Health and Government Operations Committee. The Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA) submits this letter of support for Senate Bill 615 with two amendments: (1) to change the commemorative day to September 30 and (2) to change "Awareness" to "Prevention" in the day's title.

SB615, as introduced, seeks to require the Governor to proclaim a designated day as Maryland Veterans Suicide Awareness Day. The first amendment will align the day with September's National Suicide Prevention Month and with September 30th's designation as National Suicide Prevention Day. The second amendment changes the designation to "Maryland Veterans Suicide Prevention Day". Safe messaging is important when we talk about suicide. Incorporating the word prevention immediately opens up the opportunity to talk about suicide as preventable and that prevention resources are available for veterans seeking help.

Suicide is a serious public health issue and the top clinical priority for the US Department of Veterans Affairs. Between 2020 and 2021 suicide deaths in Maryland among those who served in the military increased from 79 to 89 deaths. In 2021, of the 594 suicide deaths in Maryland, veterans accounted for 15% of them.

For three years, Maryland has been a part of the VA/SAMHSA Governor's Challenge to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans and their Families. Last November, Governor Moore signed an executive order reaffirming his administration's commitment to combating veteran suicide deaths in Maryland. Governor Moore also launched Ask the Question, a campaign to raise awareness of the importance of screening for military service when working with clients.

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TTY USERS CALL VIA MD RELAY

Designating September 30 as Maryland Veterans Suicide Prevention Day would provide the Department with an additional tool to highlight the Governor's Challenge and initiatives to prevent suicide in the veteran population. Suicide is preventable and together we can save veterans lives; MDVA respectfully requests this committee provide a favorable report on SB615.