

## **SFC MATTHEW FAST ACT WRITTEN TESTIMONY**

**Testimony of Evelyn L. Lewis, MD, MA, FAAFP, DABDA**

**In Support of SB 740 – SFC Matthew Fast Act for Warrior Healthcare**

**Before the Maryland General Assembly**

**Date: March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2025**

Good afternoon, Chair, Vice Chair and Members of the Committee,

My name is Evelyn L. Lewis, a family medicine physician who has spent 25 years caring for those who serve our nation. I continue this mission as the President and Chair of the Veterans Health and Wellness Foundation, and I am honored to testify today in strong support of the SFC Matthew Fast Act for Warrior Health.

Maryland is home to 1.3 million Warrior Community members—including our Veterans, National Guard, Reservists, Active-Duty Military, and their families. These men and women have sacrificed tremendously for our nation, yet our healthcare system continues to fail them in tragic ways.

This bill is not just about improving healthcare—it is about saving lives. It is about recognizing the sacrifices of those who have served and ensuring they do not slip through the cracks of a healthcare system that has historically overlooked their unique medical needs.

### **The Problem: A Critical Gap in Warrior Healthcare**

While Maryland is home to some of the nation's top healthcare institutions, our Warrior Community remains underserved.

#### **1. Warriors Face Unique and Complex Health Challenges**

The impact of military service extends far beyond the battlefield. Compared to civilians, Veterans and service members experience significantly higher rates of:

- PTSD → +115% increase
- Cognitive Disabilities → +42.8% increase
- Chronic Pain → +32% increase
- Hearing Impairment → +380% increase
- Cardiovascular Disease → +38.6% increase
- Cancer → +15.3% increase

Despite these severe health burdens, over 80% of Maryland's Warriors receive healthcare in commercial medical facilities—not from the VA or military providers.

#### **2. Maryland's Healthcare System is Not Equipped to Care for Warriors**

A 2018 RAND study found that only 2.3% of civilian healthcare providers are fully trained to provide culturally competent care for Warrior patients. This lack of awareness leads to misdiagnoses, inappropriate treatments, and preventable health crises.

Even more alarming, most healthcare providers **do not even ask** about a patient's military service.

A 2023 study in the *Journal of Family Medicine* revealed:

- 56% of primary care providers never or rarely ask their patients about military service.
- Only 19% regularly ask.
- Yet, 71% agree it is important for diagnosis and treatment.

This means most of our **doctors are treating Veterans without knowing they are Veterans**—and that is unacceptable.

## **The Solution: The SFC Matthew Fast Act**

The **SFC Matthew Fast Act for Warrior Health** is a simple yet powerful solution. It will:

1. Require all Maryland healthcare facilities to screen patients for military service.
  - Asking "Have you served?" should be as routine as asking about allergies or smoking history.
2. Recognize Warriors as a vulnerable population, in compliance with the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) and The Joint Commission's (TJC) National Patient Safety Goal for Healthcare Equity.
  - This ensures healthcare facilities **take action** to address Warrior health disparities.
3. Mandate an annual report on Warrior healthcare disparities, allowing Maryland to track progress and improve healthcare access.

These measures will immediately improve diagnosis, treatment, and health outcomes for Warriors across Maryland.

## **The Cost of Inaction**

We have already lost **too many heroes** because of **healthcare failures**.

Let's remember SFC Matthew Fast, whose struggles and sacrifices led to this very bill. He was a decorated warrior, but like so many others, his healthcare providers failed to recognize the impact of his service on his health.

How many more Warriors must suffer before we act?

Maryland's multi-billion-dollar healthcare industry has the resources to fix this problem—we just need the will to act.

## **A Call to Action**

By passing the **SFC Matthew Fast Act**, we will ensure that every Warrior in Maryland receives the care they have earned and deserve.

This bill is a **commonsense, cost-effective solution** that will **improve health outcomes, enhance patient safety, and save lives.**

I urge you to stand with Maryland's 1.3 million Warriors and their families. Pass the SFC Matthew Fast Act—because when we take care of those who served, we honor the very values that define our great state and nation.

**Thank you and a very special thanks to Jessica Fast for her courage and commitment to this work.**