

Suicide Prevention Month Floor Speech
U.S. Senator Joe Donnelly Remarks as Delivered
September 17, 2014

Mister President, I rise today in recognition of Suicide Prevention Month, to once again bring attention to an issue that weighs heavy on many of our hearts and minds.

Last month, the world paused to mourn the loss of a man who brought laughter and joy to countless lives. A man whose internal suffering didn't stop him from improving the lives of so many he touched, including our heroic men and women serving overseas. Robin Williams said the best audiences he ever had were the troops he entertained on USO tours.

His death showed us that we may not always know who among us is living a life of unbearable pain and suffering.

Even the strongest among us sometimes need a helping hand—including the brave men and women in uniform who protect our country each and every day. Mister President, today I want to once again shine a light on the scourge of military suicide.

Earlier this month, the Department of Defense released a report and it detailed the number of suicides among servicemembers during the first quarter of 2014. The Department of Defense reported that a total of 120 servicemembers committed suicide from January through March, including 74 active component servicemembers, 24 reserve members, and 22 National Guard members. In 2013, 475 servicemembers took their own lives. In 2012, we lost 522 to suicide. We have seen two straight years of more deaths as a result of suicide than of combat in Afghanistan.

These men and women are giving their all to support our way of life and they risk making the ultimate sacrifice to protect our freedoms. At a minimum, we should honor this service and sacrifice by doing all we can to support them.

We all understand that this is not a simple issue. There is no one solution to the problem, no cure-all that ends it tomorrow, I do believe though there are commonsense steps we can take now to make meaningful progress.

In May, I introduced the bipartisan *Jacob Sexton Military Suicide Prevention Act of 2014*. This legislation is named after Jacob Sexton, an Indiana National Guardsman from Farmland, Indiana, who took his own life while home on a 15-day leave from Afghanistan. Building upon legislation I introduced last year, the *Sexton Act* ensures that mental health is evaluated regularly and as a central element of a servicemember's overall readiness in four key ways.

First, it requires annual mental health assessments for all servicemembers, including the Active duty, Guard and Reserve. Right now, the military provides the most effective mental health care only for those who are preparing for or returning from deployment. Despite the research that shows the majority of military suicides occur among servicemembers who have never been deployed.

Second, it establishes a working group between the Department of Defense and Department of Health and Human Services to find innovative ways to improve access to mental health care for members of the Guard and Reserve. Where service members often rely on civilian health insurance and providers, like the Guard and the Reserve do, we want to team up to be able to provide them with care right in their own communities. Suicide among Guard members hit a record high in 2013 and we are committed to bringing that number down to zero.

Third, the bill requires an interagency report to evaluate existing military mental health practices and to provide recommendations for improvement, including peer-to-peer programs, I have proposed in the past.

Finally, the bill ensures that seeking help remains a sign of strength. It protects the privacy of the servicemember coming forward—because no one should be punished for seeking help. No one should be kept from their next promotion for seeking help.

I introduced the bipartisan *Sexton Act* with my Republican colleague Roger Wicker of Mississippi. Since then it has received the endorsement of numerous national organizations—including the National Guard Association of the United States, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, and the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America.

This bill is a step in the right direction in the fight against military suicide. I was encouraged when the Senate Armed Services Committee passed this legislation as part of the Fiscal Year 2015 National Defense Authorization Act just in May. This is important progress, but we need to get this legislation signed into law.

As the Senate prepares to recess, I call on the Senate to take up the NDAA as soon as we return to Washington. There is no reason why this bipartisan legislation should not be passed and passed quickly, just like we have for the last 52 years.

Our country, as all of you know, is faced with many serious issues, some of which we don't have good answers to yet, but the *Sexton Act* is a good start to address the pressing issue of military suicide. This legislation helps save lives, helps save soldiers' lives, so let's pass the NDAA, and with it the *Jacob Sexton Act*, to show our servicemen and women that we're all-in on supporting them, the same way they support us.

This legislation is just a beginning. Combatting suicide, both in our military and elsewhere, is an issue that continues to demand Congress' attention. We must continually reevaluate what we're doing, take a second and third look at the resources we're offering, and ask ourselves every day, "Can we do better? Is there more we can do before it's too late?" The answer more often than not, is "Yes."

That is why we must be vigilant in the effort to let people know they are not alone, there's somewhere to go, someone to talk to, and someone to help carry the load. We need to continue the conversation about what we can do to help our brothers and sisters, our sons and daughters, our husbands and wives, who may feel like they are struggling with seemingly insurmountable challenges all by themselves.

These challenges can be overcome. Suicide Prevention Month is a reminder of that fact. There are many resources available to those who struggle with suicidal thoughts. For our servicemembers, trained mental health specialists are available 24 hours a day through the Military & Veterans crisis line. All you have to do is call 1-800-273-8255 and press 1, and you'll get immediate, confidential assistance 24 hours per day. For additional help, militarymentalhealth.org offers a free, 100% anonymous, mental health assessment. This is a valuable tool for servicemembers unsure of where they stand.

I hope all of our servicemembers struggling with mental health concerns and with challenges know we're there for them and that we're working nonstop to ensure that they receive the care and support they deserve. Let's continue to spread that message throughout the rest of Suicide Prevention Month, and every month thereafter.