

REMARKS AS DELIVERED

Remarks by U.S. Senator Joe Donnelly
Bill Introduction: The Jacob Sexton Military Suicide Prevention Act of 2013
United States Senate Chamber
Washington, D.C.
Thursday, April 25, 2013

Thank you, Mr. President. I would like to take time to speak about an important issue that needs immediate attention—suicide among our servicemembers and veterans. Last year, we lost more servicemen and women to suicide than we lost in combat in Afghanistan.

In 2012, approximately 349 members of the United States Military, including active duty, Guard, and Reserve, committed suicide, more than the total number of servicemembers who died in combat operations.

This number does not even include the more than 6,000 veterans we lost last year to suicide.

This is unacceptable. This has to end.

Today, I am introducing my first bill as a United States Senator, the Jacob Sexton Military Suicide Prevention Act of 2013. We're doing this to address this pervasive issue. This bill seeks to better identify servicemembers struggling with mental health issues and to ensure they receive the assistance they need before resorting to this tragic act.

I named this bill after a member of the Indiana National Guard, Jacob Sexton, a native of Farmland, Indiana, who tragically took his life in 2009 while home on a 15-day leave from Afghanistan. His death came as a shock to his family and his friends as well as his fellow Guard members.

This is a picture of Jacob while on duty. He's an American hero. He did everything he could to serve his country and to try to help other people from another country, help people from around the world to live a better life.

A couple months ago, I heard from Jacob's dad, Jeff, and I have since learned about Jacob's childhood in Indiana. Jacob's service to our nation and the big heart he'd always show through his dedication to bringing winter coats to all the kids he met in Afghanistan during his deployment.

Jeff, along with his wife and Jacob's mom, Barbara, have since become advocates for suicide prevention. They want to make sure what happened to Jacob doesn't happen to anyone else. They helped to inspire this bill, and I thank them for their dedication to preventing these tragedies for other parents and loved ones of men and women in uniform.

This is a collage that was made in honor of Jacob by his mom, Barbara. It is a reflection of who he is, the things he did, the people he served, and the wonderful spirit of “can do” and “how can I help my country” that permeated who he was.

My hope is that we can help men and women like Jacob who are struggling with mental health issues, to get them the help they need before they resort to taking their own life.

The facts, Mr. President, on military suicides are stark:

According to the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Center for Disease Control, at least 30,000 veterans and military members have committed suicide since the Department of Defense began closely tracking these numbers in 2009.

It is important to note that suicide is not necessarily linked to deployments abroad. Since the Defense Department Suicide Prevention office began keeping detailed records in 2008, less than half of suicide victims had deployed and few were involved in combat.

Most of DOD’s existing suicide prevention programs do so within the context of deployments.

As we drawdown in Afghanistan and away from the strain of multiple deployments it is time to find a more integrated solution that does not rely on the deployment cycle to assess a servicemember’s mental health.

Instead, research has shown that other risk factors, such as relationship issues, legal or financial issues, or substance abuse, play a larger role in suicides than a servicemember’s deployment history. We have heard this firsthand from Crisis Intervention Officers right in my home state in Indiana.

Further, many of these suicide victims did not communicate their intent to take their own life, nor did they have known behavioral health issues.

Given the facts before us, what does the current mental health system look like?

The current mental health systems for both active and retired military rely on a servicemember’s or a veteran’s willingness to self-report suicidal thoughts and to seek out assistance.

The back-up to this system is if family members, peers, or coworkers identify changes in behavior and then recommend that their loved one or friend seek assistance.

So, how do we improve the system?

The Jacob Sexton Military Suicide Prevention Act of 2013 would establish a pilot program in each of the military services and also the reserve components to integrate annual mental health assessments into a servicemember’s Periodic Health Assessment, or PHA.

That's an annual review designed to track whether a servicemember is "fit" to serve. The pilot program would expand that review to include a more detailed mental health review and to identify risk factors for mental illness so that servicemembers can receive preventative care and help.

By building on the system that monitors the member from induction to transition into veteran's status, an expanded review including a mental health assessment would create a holistic picture of the servicemember's readiness to serve. The servicemember can carry this record with them as they leave the service and it could help inform any future claims for veterans' benefits.

The Jacob Sexton Military Suicide Prevention Act would also integrate a first-line supervisor's input. That supervisor plays an important role in a servicemember's life and may be aware of relationships or financial problems but not able to address them unless the servicemember speaks up.

Sometimes these problems affect performance. The supervisor's input would help identify potential triggers for stress and suicidal tendencies or problems in work performance. Then, the results of the whole questionnaire would be reviewed by mental health specialists.

If problems or risk factors are identified, servicemembers would be referred to behavioral health specialists for further evaluation and medical care.

I included in this legislation, and this is critical, privacy protections to ensure that information collected through the surveys is used only for medical purposes. It cannot be used for promotion, retention, or disciplinary purposes. I strongly believe that a servicemember should not bear any consequences for reporting on their mental health or trying to seek out mental health assistance.

Finally, as I think we should expect of all government programs and proposals, my bill would require an assessment as to whether or not it is actually working. To determine the effectiveness of the program and ways to move forward, this bill would require a report from the Department of Defense to Congress on the impact of the program in identifying behavioral health concerns and interventions in suicides.

We have lost far, far too many men and women like Jacob.

Let us come together in a bipartisan fashion to honor the memories of Jacob and all those Americans that we have lost by working to improve our ability to spot warning signs before it is too late. I urge my colleagues to support this legislation on behalf of those who sacrifice so much for our nation every day.

Mr. President, I yield back.