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COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

ONE HUNDRED SIXTEENTH CONGRESS

B-234 LONGWORTH HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515

<http://veterans.house.gov>

October 14, 2020

The Honorable Robert Wilkie
 Secretary
 U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
 810 Vermont Avenue, NW
 Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Mr. Secretary:

I write to express concern that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has yet to release its annual report on veteran suicide, traditionally made public each year during Suicide Prevention Awareness Month in September. I request that VA provide a date by which the 2020 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report will be released, and should that date fall beyond November 1, 2020, I request a briefing for me and my staff on the findings and recommendations prior to November 1.

Tracking the data on veteran suicide is vital to the Committee's oversight role, and although VA's Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention leaders have been very forthcoming in briefing my staff on a regular basis, this is no substitute for the formal, methodologically rigorous annual report process. At a time when VA has been advocating strongly for and against specific pieces of federal legislation related to veteran suicide prevention, it is especially vital that the Department share its most recent report now, to ensure that Congress has the opportunity to review VA's current and proposed prevention efforts in the context of actual data.

As you know, the Department of Defense released its annual suicide report (for calendar year 2019) on October 1, 2020.¹ I understand that there are additional data lags for VA because of the necessary reliance on civilian records, and thus VA's 2020 report will incorporate the most recent, available data on veteran suicide from 2018. This means, too, that VA's 2020 report will be unable to incorporate any information on veteran suicide deaths during the pandemic, but I look forward to hearing about any preliminary trends your scientists may have noted in light of data on more proximal risk factors (such as increases in substance use rates, Veterans Crisis Line emergency dispatches, firearm purchases, etc.).

¹Department of Defense, Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, *Annual Suicide Report, Calendar Year 2019* (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 1, 2020).

<https://www.dspo.mil/Portals/113/Documents/CY2019%20Suicide%20Report/DoD%20Calendar%20Year%20CY%202019%20Annual%20Suicide%20Report.pdf?ver=YO44IZVcVA9mzwtfsdO5Ew%3d%3d>.

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Veteran suicide prevention is an urgent and ongoing priority for this Committee, and I am dismayed to see not only a delay in VA's release of its annual report, but also a reluctance to specify the reason for the delay and a date certain for publication. I look forward to getting a date from you as well as a formal briefing in the next two weeks, should VA be unable to guarantee an October release.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mark Takano". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Mark Takano
Chairman