

July 30, 2007

WASHINGTON -- U.S. Rep. Gus Bilirakis (R-Fla.), a member of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs and chairman of the GOP Policy Committee's Veterans' Affairs Task Force, today joined with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in announcing a national suicide prevention hotline for veterans.

The nationwide toll-free hotline, **1-800-273-TALK (8255)**, is part of the National Suicide Prevention Initiative and links the caller directly with mental health professionals who know how to assess and respond to crisis situations for veterans at risk of suicide.

"This hotline will serve as a direct resource for veterans contemplating suicide, and will provide concerned friends and family with guidance on how to obtain help for their loved one," said Rep. Bilirakis. "Many veterans returning from war are often afflicted not just with physical injuries, but also injuries of the mind that can go undetected. This hotline will enable veterans to get the help they need as quickly as possible, any time of the day, and any day of the week."

Suicide accounts for approximately 30,000 deaths annually, making it the 11th most frequent cause of death in the United States. A recent report published in the Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health found that male veterans were twice as likely to commit suicide as those who never served.

"Veterans need to know these VA professionals are literally a phone call away," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Jim Nicholson in an official press release announcing the hotline. "All service members who experience the stresses of combat can have wounds on their minds as well as their bodies. Veterans should see mental health services as another benefit they have earned, which the men and women of VA are honored to provide."

The VA, which is the largest provider of mental health care in the nation, will spend about \$3 billion for mental health this year alone. Currently, more than 9,000 mental health professionals, backed up by primary care physicians and other health professionals in every VA medical center and outpatient clinic, provide mental health care to about 1 million veterans each year.

In addition to the national hotline, the Department has established a website, at <http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov> to provide information on suicide prevention awareness.

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