



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Pamela Helming

## Time to Accurately Count Veteran Suicide Rate

PAMELA HELMING November 8, 2019

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Citing the epidemic of veterans' suicide, Senator Pam Helming has introduced legislation that would require coroners and medical examiners to count information regarding the veteran's status of anyone who takes his or her own life. Currently, coroners complete a death certificate after every unattended or suspicious passing. This new legislation would amend the form they currently complete to have them check off a box if the veteran's status of the decedent is known.

"We have an epidemic of veteran suicide facing our country and state. Yet, we still do not know just how big the problem is because of the difficulty gathering facts about this issue. Every time I visit a veterans' group anywhere in my district I hear about this problem. However, current law does not address this issue and there is not enough data available for lawmakers, veterans' advocates, public health officials, or community members to properly address the root causes of this problem. The data gathered using this new tool will be critical for the success of our anti-suicide efforts. We should and we must do more to honor the service and sacrifice of our veterans. This is just one small step forward, but together, we can end the veteran suicide crisis and ensure that those who have bravely served our country get the help and support they need to succeed," said Senator Helming.

Senator Helming's legislation would require the NYS Division of Veterans' Affairs to develop a one page form by which a coroner or medical examiner would fill out to report any death that appears to be suicide by a person who is a veteran. The form could be submitted either on paper or electronically. The Division of Veterans' Affairs would be able to share only the statistical data with health researchers and policy makers as they work to develop new solutions to improve veterans access to mental health.

"Veteran suicide is a major epidemic and becoming larger, but we don't know just how big it is. Most times we, as coroners, don't know of a person's veteran status. This legislation will help us put a number to this and at that point, help our veterans get the necessary treatment they so much deserve," said Michael John, Coroner, County of Ontario

"Suicide is a tragic end and an unfortunate and desperate decision by far too many good people. The suicide of a veteran is especially tragic. Men and women who place their lives at risk by enlisting, serving, and fighting for our very lives who come home and after sacrificing so much and cannot find that light out of the hell, need us to help be that light. I am proud of Senator Helming in her efforts to increase the amount and type of information that our service providers need to increase and enhance services for the warriors who carry the unseen scars of battle. It is unacceptable that these brave women and men survive battles abroad only to lose their battle with PTSD and depression when they come home" Jim Ritts, Ontario County District Attorney said.

"I commend Senator Helming for her efforts on the weekend leading up to Veterans Day, for her continued support of veterans. I request that both branches of our State Government embrace the Senator's legislation. This ability to collect, share and develop new methods to improve the mental health of our veterans, is critical to their survival" Jack Marren, Ontario County Chairman said.

"I applaud Senator Helming's sincere efforts in addressing the issue of veteran suicides. We are faced with a crisis which impacts our veterans and their families in unfathomable dimensions. A concentrated and collective effort by all parties: veterans' groups, individual veterans, families, civic organizations, and public support programs have a vested interest in finding solutions. Proper collection and intense analysis of empirical data will be one more tool in this fight to stop this tragedy amongst our military personnel. It is too often a silent and unnoticed phenomenon that now needs to be met head on. Senator Helming's introduction of legislation bringing public attention to veteran suicides is most appropriate during this Veterans Day period. Thank you Senator Helming," said Bob Green Town of Bristol Supervisor/Chairman of Ontario County Public Safety Committee.

"The topic of suicide is difficult, painful, and uncomfortable for everyone. In 2013, after receiving data that Livingston County had the highest suicide rate in the nine county Finger Lakes County region, the Genesee Valley Health Partnership embarked on a mission to reduce death by suicide in Livingston County and to bring conversations about suicide prevention and support to forefront of public health conversations. The Livingston County Suicide Prevention Task Force was created in 2013. In 2016, in an effort to target focused efforts in prevention work and bring support to survivors of suicide death, the Task Force reached out to the County Health Department to begin looking at coroners' data. The Task Force discovered that fifty percent of deaths by suicide that year were older veterans. Without the data, the Task Force was making inaccurate assumptions about where efforts should be focused. Accurate data allows those involved in prevention efforts to begin an immediate, targeted, best practice approach to suicide prevention work on a local, state, and regional basis. The ultimate goal of reducing suicide has the greatest impact if our work plans are data driven. Our work while difficult is meaningful. I hope that this new legislation brings stakeholders together to increase capacity and focus on actionable efforts. Furthermore, it will ensure that if funding is needed to support these efforts there is data to

apply for such assistance. I am proud of Livingston County's Suicide Prevention Task Force. It has been successful because of data sharing. I only hope that others will benefit from these best practices in the future," said Jason B. Skinner, Director of Livingston County Veterans Services