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VA Secretary Announces Intention to Expand Mental Health Care to Former Service members With Other-than-honorable Discharges and in Crisis

WASHINGTON – Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Dr. David J. Shulkin while testifying in a House Veterans Affairs Committee hearing on March 7, 2017, announced his intention to expand provisions for urgent mental health care needs to former service members with other-than-honorable (OTH) administrative discharges. This move marks the first time a VA Secretary has implemented an initiative specifically focused on expanding access to assist former OTH service members who are in mental health distress and may be at risk for suicide or other adverse behaviors.

“The president and I have made it clear that suicide prevention is one of our top priorities,” Shulkin said. “We know the rate of death by suicide among Veterans who do not use VA care is increasing at a greater rate than Veterans who use VA care. This is a national emergency that requires bold action. We must and we will do all that we can to help former service members who may be at risk. When we say even one Veteran suicide is one too many, we mean it.”

It is estimated that there are a little more than 500,000 former service members with OTH discharges. As part of the proposal, former OTH service members would be able to seek treatment at a VA emergency department, Vet Center or contact the Veterans Crisis Line.

“Our goal is simple: to save lives,” Shulkin continued. “Veterans who are in crisis should receive help immediately. Far too many Veterans have fallen victim to suicide, roughly 20 every day. Far too many families are left behind asking themselves what more could have been done. The time for action is now.”

Before finalizing the plan in early summer, Shulkin will meet with Congress, Veterans Service Organizations and Department of Defense officials to determine the best way forward to get these former service members the care they need.

“I look forward to working with leaders like Congressman Mike Coffman from Colorado, who has been a champion for OTH service members,” Shulkin added. “I am grateful for his commitment to our nation’s Veterans and for helping me better understand the urgency of getting this right.”

Veterans in crisis should call the Veterans Crisis Line at 800-273-8255 (press 1), or text 838255.

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