

Would Direct \$20 Million to VA for Direct Advertising and Online Social Media Outreach

The U.S. House of Representatives tonight unanimously passed an amendment written by U.S. Rep. Rush Holt (NJ-12) to allocate \$20 million into the FY2011 Department of Veterans Affairs budget for direct advertising and the use of online social media for suicide prevention outreach. Later tonight, the House is expected to pass the FY2011 funding bill for the Department of Veterans Affairs, and then it would need Senate passage.

“We have few responsibilities as solemn and important as ensuring that our veterans receive the care they deserve,” Holt said. “Our commitment to reducing suicides among our veterans must be comprehensive and unwavering. My amendment is designed to give the VA the resources and the direction to get appropriate and broad-based outreach underway as soon as President Obama signs this bill.”

(Video of Rep. Holt speaking on the House floor can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CVR6LNitWxs>)

Increasing outreach to veterans was one of the things Linda Bean discussed earlier this month when she testified before the House Committee on Veterans Affairs. Bean is the mother of the late Sergeant Coleman S. Bean of East Brunswick, New Jersey, who killed himself in September 2008 after serving two tours in Iraq. Because Sgt. Bean was a member of the Individual Ready Reserve, he could not get treatment for his condition because the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs refused to take ownership of him and the thousands like him.

In May, the House passed language based on legislation Holt introduced in Coleman Bean’s memory to fill a void in the military’s suicide prevention efforts among members of the Individual Ready Reserve and for other soldiers who are designated as Individual Mobilization Augmentees. Unlike their active duty counterparts or those normally assigned to existing Guard and Reserve units, members of the IRR and those designated as IMAs normally are only assigned to units upon mobilization. In between deployments, they lack direct, easy access to the kinds of suicide prevention services and support structures available to active duty troops – a deficiency the bill seeks to fix. Holt’s legislation would require the Defense Department to

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Wednesday, 28 July 2010 16:52

conduct periodic telephonic outreach and counseling calls to reservists like Coleman. The idea is to check on the members' mental, emotional, and professional well-being and to identify and treat any IRR members who are deemed to be at risk of harming themselves.