

117TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

S. 544

To direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to designate one week each year as “Buddy Check Week” for the purpose of outreach and education concerning peer wellness checks for veterans, and for other purposes.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

MARCH 2 (legislative day, MARCH 1), 2021

Ms. ERNST (for herself, Ms. HASSAN, Mr. BENNET, Ms. CANTWELL, Mrs. GILLIBRAND, Mr. COONS, Mrs. CAPITO, Mr. COTTON, Mrs. BLACKBURN, Mr. BARRASSO, and Ms. ROSEN) introduced the following bill; which was read twice and referred to the Committee on Veterans’ Affairs

A BILL

To direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to designate one week each year as “Buddy Check Week” for the purpose of outreach and education concerning peer wellness checks for veterans, and for other purposes.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

3 **SECTION 1. DESIGNATION OF BUDDY CHECK WEEK BY SEC-**
4 **RETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS.**

5 (a) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary of Veterans Affairs
6 shall designate one week each year to organize outreach
7 events and educate veterans on how to conduct peer

1 wellness checks, which shall be known as “Buddy Check
2 Week”.

3 (b) EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES.—

4 (1) IN GENERAL.—During Buddy Check Week,
5 the Secretary, in consultation with organizations
6 that represent veterans, nonprofits that serve vet-
7 erans, mental health experts, members of the Armed
8 Forces, and such other entities and individuals as
9 the Secretary considers appropriate, shall collaborate
10 with organizations that represent veterans to provide
11 educational opportunities for veterans to learn how
12 to conduct peer wellness checks.

13 (2) TRAINING MATTERS.—As part of the edu-
14 cational opportunities provided under paragraph (1),
15 the Secretary shall provide the following:

16 (A) A script for veterans to use to conduct
17 peer wellness checks that includes information
18 on appropriate referrals to resources veterans
19 might need.

20 (B) Online and in-person training, as ap-
21 propriate, on how to conduct a peer wellness
22 check.

23 (C) Opportunities for members of organi-
24 zations that represent veterans to learn how to

1 train individuals to conduct peer wellness
2 checks.

3 (D) Training for veterans participating in
4 Buddy Check Week on how to transfer a phone
5 call directly to the Veterans Crisis Line.

6 (E) Resiliency training for veterans partici-
7 pating in Buddy Check Week on handling a vet-
8 eran in crisis.

9 (3) ONLINE MATERIALS.—All training materials
10 provided under the educational opportunities under
11 paragraph (1) shall be made publicly available on a
12 website of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

13 (c) OUTREACH.—The Secretary, in collaboration with
14 organizations that represent veterans, may conduct out-
15 reach regarding educational opportunities under sub-
16 section (b) at—

17 (1) public events where many veterans are ex-
18 pected to congregate;

19 (2) meetings of organizations that represent
20 veterans;

21 (3) facilities of the Department; and

22 (4) such other locations as the Secretary, in col-
23 laboration with organizations that represent vet-
24 erans, considers appropriate.

25 (d) VETERANS CRISIS LINE PLAN.—

1 (1) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary shall ensure
2 that a plan exists for handling the potential increase
3 in the number of calls into the Veterans Crisis Line
4 that may occur during Buddy Check Week.

5 (2) SUBMITTAL OF PLAN.—The head of the
6 Veterans Crisis Line shall submit to the Secretary a
7 plan for how to handle excess calls during Buddy
8 Check Week, which may include the following:

9 (A) Additional hours for staff.

10 (B) The use of a backup call center.

11 (C) Any other plan to ensure that calls
12 from veterans in crisis are being answered in a
13 timely manner by an individual trained at the
14 same level as a Veterans Crisis Line responder.

15 (e) DEFINITIONS.—In this section:

16 (1) ORGANIZATION THAT REPRESENTS VET-
17 ERANS.—The term “organization that represents
18 veterans” means an organization recognized by the
19 Secretary for the representation of veterans under
20 section 5902 of title 38, United States Code.

21 (2) VETERAN.—The term “veteran” has the
22 meaning given that term in section 101 of such title.

23 (3) VETERANS CRISIS LINE.—The term “Vet-
24 erans Crisis Line” means the toll-free hotline for

1 veterans provided by the Secretary under section
2 1720F(h) of such title.

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