

American people have given them the majorities in both Houses to do it.

So instead of cursing the darkness and failing to fund the Department of Homeland Security, why don't they roll up their sleeves and go to work as Members of the House and Senate and pass immigration reform? I think that is worthy of this great body and the one across the rotunda. But to underfund the Department of Homeland Security that protects us from terrorism? What are they thinking?

I thank the Senator from Nevada for returning. It feels great to have you back in your capacity here as our leader on the Democratic side and as my friend.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. GARDNER). The Senator from Georgia.

WELCOMING BACK SENATOR REID

Mr. ISAKSON. Mr. President, I would like to add that we are glad to have Senator REID back. I know he has had a difficult time the last few weeks, and we are proud he is back on his feet.

Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to be recognized to address the Clay Hunt suicide prevention bill, followed by Senator BLUMENTHAL from Connecticut.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

CLAY HUNT SUICIDE PREVENTION FOR AMERICAN VETERANS ACT

Mr. ISAKSON. Mr. President, I want to give you a stark fact and figure. Every year 8,000 American veterans take their own lives and commit suicide. That is more people, more veterans than were killed in all the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

We have a major epidemic in America's Armed Forces because of soft tissue issues of PTSD and TBI. This Congress, both Committees on Veterans' Affairs—in the House and Senate—have acted, and tomorrow this Senate will vote on the Clay Hunt suicide prevention bill. I want to talk about it for a few minutes because it is critically important.

When these men and women go overseas and volunteer to serve America and lay their lives on the line for us, many come back with terrible injuries, prosthesis, an inability to walk, some in wheelchairs. But the stealth disease, the one that hurts the most, the one that permeates the most, is PTSD and TBI. We have been doing as much as we could but not enough within veterans health care.

Secretary McDonald has committed himself to improving the services of mental health to our veterans. I have committed myself. Senator BLUMENTHAL has committed himself. Senator BOOZMAN from Arkansas, Senator MCCAIN from Arizona, who will speak later—all are committed to see to it that we have a better program for our veterans.

What the Clay Hunt suicide prevention bill does is create incentives for more psychiatric professionals to come into the VA health care system because psychiatry is the best physician expertise you need to deal with PTSD and TBI. But it also has external audits of the VA to make sure they are doing what needs to take place in terms of veterans health care and in terms of mental health for our veterans.

The tragedies are daily, the tragedies are compounding, and we must find an end to it. A lot of people think these tragedies are with veterans of the gulf war, our Operation Iraqi Freedom, or our battle in Afghanistan. But, quite frankly, a lot of them are our Vietnam veterans. We looked the other way and did not recognize PTSD and TBI for a long time, but now we have recognized it front and center, and it is the major injury from the battles in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other conflicts in the history of the United States of America. We owe it to our veterans to have the best mental health available to them.

In my hometown of Atlanta, on August 21, 2013, I called a field hearing at Georgia State University and brought in all the VA experts on suicide prevention because, quite frankly, we had had three suicides in the Atlanta VA within a very short period of time that got high-profile headlines in our newspaper.

As it turned out, we found that we really did not have the followup, the follow-through, and the continuum of care that mental health needs and deserves, and we had some veterans who had fallen through the cracks—not just in Atlanta but around the United States of America. In fact, as recently as last week there was a tragic death in Atlanta. We do not know yet the root cause of it, but we know the individual may have had mental health problems and was a veteran of the war in Afghanistan and took their life and the life of their children. We do not know whether PTSD or TBI was the contributing cause or whether we had done anything wrong in terms of veterans health care. But we know this: Four more lives were taken from the stealth disease called tragic brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder.

So I am very pleased as the chairman of the Veterans Affairs' Committee to tell you that the House unanimously passed this bill 3 weeks ago on the floor of the House, the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee unanimously passed it 2 weeks ago in committee, and the bill we will vote on tomorrow can go directly from the floor of the Senate to the desk of the President of the United States and be signed.

Very quickly, I want to make two points for anybody who is listening that remembers last year. This bill failed last year. It failed for two reasons:

One, Members questioned whether we could afford it because it had a price tag of \$24 million. We have fixed the

price problem by taking internally generated funds of the VA to pay the \$24 million. That is done.

Secondly, some said: Well, this is a duplicative service. We already have mental health services and suicide prevention at the VA.

We have some, and we do not have enough. It is not duplicative. It is absolutely necessary and essential that we do what we are doing.

Mr. President, I am proud to come to the floor of the Senate on behalf of all of our veterans and tell them: Washington is watching. We are listening. We feel your pain. We understand the problems you have. And we are going to do everything we can to see to it that the Clay Hunt suicide prevention bill becomes the law of the land, that the VA is held accountable for its policies and procedure in mental health, and that we put an end and stem the tide of the tragic number of veteran suicides that take place every single day.

I would like to now yield to my ranking member on the Veterans' Affairs Committee, the Senator from Connecticut, who has done an overwhelmingly great job to see this through from beginning to end, Mr. BLUMENTHAL.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Connecticut.

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Mr. President, I begin by thanking the chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, Senator ISAKSON, and really giving him immeasurable credit for his courage and his fortitude in addressing this bill that he could have allowed to languish on the agenda of the Veterans' Affairs Committee. In fact, he made it the very first agenda item—the very first issue—that we would confront on the Veterans' Affairs Committee at our very first meeting, and it passed unanimously through the Veterans' Affairs Committee because of his leadership—and I really mean his leadership in making it happen.

So on behalf of the veterans of America, he deserves due credit, and so do my colleagues on the Veterans' Affairs Committee, Senator BOOZMAN and Senator SANDERS, who championed this bill, along with Senator BURR.

During the last session I was pleased to argue for it on the floor in the closing days of the session, and unfortunately it failed to pass.

There is no reason to look back and try to blame others for that failure. What is important is to look forward and to give credit to both sides of the aisle—most especially to my colleague, Senator MCCAIN, who, of course, dwarfs us in his service to our Nation in the Armed Forces. He literally is a giant in his service and sacrifice for our Nation while serving in the Navy. I have felt very privileged and proud to work with him and to introduce this measure, the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act or the Clay Hunt SAV Act, as it is called, that basically provides for suicide prevention

services and, even more importantly, pioneers and champions mental health care for our VA.

I thank all of our colleagues who have worked on this bill over the past year or so because this measure gives us a tremendous opportunity to set a direction for the VA and for the Senate. If I may be so bold and perhaps presumptuous, I say this measure is truly bipartisan. It provides a template for bipartisan action to help our veterans, our military men and women who serve now, and to set a real lodestar for action by this body.

Very fittingly, we are on the floor when the Democratic leader, Senator REID has returned. I am tremendously heartened by his presence here and by the President's budget today, which provides a proposed increase in health care spending and, most especially, mental health care spending, to \$7.4 billion from last year's expenditure of \$6.7 billion. It is significant, again, in the context of a bipartisan approach to this issue.

This legislation is named for Clay Hunt, a marine, a patriot, a veteran who served bravely in Iraq. His mom, Susan Selke, is a real hero. She came before the Veterans' Affairs Committee during the last session.

Her testimony was not only as a patriot and an advocate of veterans but as a family member. There have been too many family members forced to grieve the loss of their loved ones who have succumbed to suicide, as did Clay Hunt in March of 2011, after struggling valiantly and courageously with post-traumatic stress and the inadequate care of his local VA hospital.

Far too many of Clay Hunt's fellow veterans, 22 per day, have succumbed to suicide, including a friend of mine, Justin Eldridge of southeastern Connecticut.

Justin braved mortar fire and sniper attacks in Afghanistan to return to southeastern Connecticut and to his family, his children, and his wife Joanna. Suffering from post-traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress, tragically, like so many others, Justin slipped through the cracks of his local VA facility and eventually succumbed in his fight against those inner demons and invisible wounds when he took his own life. As brave as Justin Eldridge was on the battlefield, he could not win that war at home.

How Justin and Clay fell into that black hole of depression and despair I certainly will never understand, but we grieve for them and we hope that their example of courage will inspire us to face this issue.

All too often, the response to suicide—whether it is among veterans or others—is denial. It is to turn away, to look in the other direction because sometimes it is too painful or there is stigma or shame in mental health needs.

We can conquer that stigma and shame. To its credit the military is doing more every day. The VA has

raised awareness and is increasing its commitment.

This bill is a tremendous opportunity for the VA to be a pioneer and champion in mental health care, just as it has been in other areas of health care, such as amputee rehabilitation, prosthetics, and traumatic brain injury.

This bill is a downpayment. It is the beginning—not the end—of our commitment and our solutions to problems. It is a worthwhile measure to take limited, targeted steps—less than we must eventually do—to keep faith with our veterans and their mental health needs.

I hope the committee and this Congress will continue in this great, bipartisan spirit.

I look forward to a continuing partnership with my friend Senator ISAKSON, who is such a leader in this area, as we work on these issues and seek to make progress as quickly as possible. As we do so—remember all of our efforts from all of the years of conflict and war in this country—Senator ISAKSON is absolutely right that post-traumatic stress and mental health needs are hardly limited to the veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan.

I have worked hard to help veterans of the Vietnam and Korea eras. In fact, I successfully championed the needs of our veterans of earlier eras when they have been burdened by less-than-honorable discharge resulting from post-traumatic stress, from an era when post-traumatic stress was nonexistent as a diagnosis.

Post-traumatic stress was unknown for our Vietnam and Korea veterans. It was not unknown as a condition. It was not nonexistent. It was simply unknown has a diagnosis. It was not called post-traumatic stress. It may have been called shell shock or battle fatigue. But the horror, the nightmares, the cold sweats, the headaches, and the crippling mental issues have plagued many of our veterans over many eras and many wars.

Today we take a step to recognize this Nation's obligation to Justin Eldridge, to Clay Hunt, to all of our veterans and to Joanna Eldridge, Susan Selke, and to the countless family members who have struggled and borne that burden side by side when their heroes have awakened at night with the nightmares and the battles they continue to fight against post-traumatic stress, the invisible wounds, and the inner demons that have come back with them from their service.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. BOOZMAN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. BOOZMAN. Mr. President, on March 21, 2010, Deborah Johnson of

Sherwood, AR, answered a call no parent should ever receive. Her son, 23-year-old Army Private Jeremy Andrew Johnson, was dead from a drug overdose.

Private Johnson was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder after his deployment to Afghanistan. Deborah said she thought he was getting the proper care he needed during the transition out of the military, but when she received a goodbye text from him, she knew he needed more help.

The family made his commanders aware of his suicidal thoughts and Private Johnson was put on suicide watch. Three days later Deborah answered that horrible call.

Deborah shared her family's story with me in hopes that other families can be spared the anguish of losing a loved one to mental illness.

Deborah understands Congress has an opportunity to deliver help to veterans living with mental illness and prevent suicides by passing the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act. This legislation would improve mental health care and suicide prevention resources for veterans by increasing access to mental health programs, providing incentives to recruit and retain psychiatrists to treat veterans and enhancing resources for members of the military transitioning to civilian life.

The VA estimates 22 veterans commit suicide every day. This trend is tragic and it is unacceptable. We need to provide the VA with the personnel, services, and proper tools to help veterans facing mental illness struggles. These invisible injuries are why we struggle to identify at-risk individuals.

As a member of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, my colleagues and I are working to fully understand the scope of mental illness in our veteran community. In the meantime, we are paving the way for improvements.

Two weeks ago the Veterans' Affairs Committee met for its first order of business in the 114th Congress—approving the Clay Hunt SAV Act. I am proud to say the committee approved this bill with a bipartisan vote of 15 to 0. Our veterans deserve this care.

The VA needs to evaluate its mental health programs using metrics common to mental health practitioners to determine the success of its programs. This legislation will do that. It will help the VA more efficiently use the taxpayer funding it receives to support the programs most effective for our veterans.

The House approved this bill in January and I am confident the Senate will follow its lead. Deborah Johnson says she wishes Congress would have taken up legislation to improve mental health services years ago. As the President of the Arkansas chapter of Gold Star Mothers, Deborah hears similarities from other families who have suffered a loss because of suicide. She admits that a one-size-fits-all approach

will not adequately address mental health struggles, but she is hopeful the Clay Hunt SAV Act will help prevent other families from suffering the pain hers lives with.

We owe it to Deborah and others like her who have lost loved ones to this battle, as well as servicemembers and veterans coping with mental health issues, to make this one of the first bills the 114th Congress sends to President Obama to sign.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Ms. WARREN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Ms. WARREN. Mr. President, I come to the floor in strong support of the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act.

Our men and women in uniform serve our country with honor and courage. They put themselves in harm's way day in and day out to protect us. I have a special appreciation for how much servicemembers and their families contribute to our country, and how important it is that we honor their service. All three of my brothers served in the military, and my oldest brother was career military. He flew 288 combat missions in Vietnam.

When you grow up in a family with someone in the military, you know how lucky you are to see them come home safely. But that doesn't mean the sacred trust with our servicemembers ends the moment they step off a plane. We owe our servicemembers the very best, and that means ensuring they always have access to high-quality services and care, including mental health care.

The Clay Hunt SAV Act, introduced in the Senate by Senators JOHN MCCAIN and RICHARD BLUMENTHAL, would strengthen critical mental health care services and suicide prevention resources for our country's veterans. We have heard the deeply troubling statistics. The VA has reported that 22 veterans die each day from suicide. Data collected in the BackHome project shows that while 10 percent of Americans served in the military, veterans make up 20 percent of all suicides in the United States. These statistics tell us something is deeply wrong and that we need to make significant changes.

The SAV act calls for an evaluation of the mental health services and suicide prevention efforts of the Department of Veterans Affairs and Department of Defense, and launches a pilot program to provide education loan repayment for psychiatrists who work at the VA. It also helps build stronger partnerships between the VA and non-profit organizations working with veterans in our communities.

The SAV act is named for Clay Hunt, a marine veteran from Texas who

served in Iraq and Afghanistan and was a strong advocate for improved services for his fellow veterans. He struggled with post-traumatic stress, and when he was unable to access the care he needed from the VA, he took his own life.

As Clay's mother Susan Selke said in her testimony at the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee hearing last summer:

Not one more veteran should have to go through what Clay went through with the VA after returning home from the war. Not one more parent should have to testify before a congressional committee to compel the VA to fulfill its responsibilities to those who served and sacrificed.

She went on to say:

The reforms, evaluations, and programs directed by this legislation will be critical to helping the VA better serve and treat veterans suffering from mental injuries from war. Had the VA been doing these things all along, it very well may have saved Clay's life.

I am proud Massachusetts has taken steps at the State level to help improve suicide prevention resources for veterans, such as establishing the State-wide Advocacy for Veterans' Empowerment Program, or SAVE.

The SAVE team is comprised of veterans who work directly in the community to connect veterans and their families to services provided by the Commonwealth and by nonprofits. I have also visited several outstanding community organizations in Massachusetts, such as Veterans Inc. in Worcester, Soldier On in Pittsfield, and the New England Center for Homeless Veterans in Boston, that work tirelessly to help servicemembers access the full range of services they need and deserve, from housing and education to health care.

In August, I met with veterans in Framingham, MA, at a mobile vet center. One of the veterans I heard from was Army MAJ Justin Fitch, who was working at the Natick Soldier Research Development and Engineering Center. Justin, who is battling terminal cancer and has had his own struggles with depression, is retiring from the Army just this week, but he is still a powerful and relentless voice fighting to improve care and prevent suicide among veterans fighting depression and psychological stress after returning home from war.

Justin told me:

Too many veterans are suffering in silence. Twenty-two a day is a lot. One is too many.

Justin is right. Our armed service men and women are tough, smart, and courageous. They make huge sacrifices to keep our families safe, and we owe them all a true debt of gratitude for their service. But gratitude isn't enough. We must do more to protect our men and women in uniform who devote their lives to the service of our country.

It is clear that Congress has more work to do to bolster our Nation's commitment to supporting veterans and

providing the mental health care services they deserve. The Clay Hunt SAV Act is an important part of this effort. I hope my colleagues will join me in voting to pass this legislation in the Senate.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. COATS). The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. WHITEHOUSE. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Mr. WHITEHOUSE. Mr. President, I am here now for the 88th time to urge this body to wake up to the looming threat of climate change.

In the last few weeks, my Republican colleagues have talked about climate change here on the floor more than at any other time since I began giving these weekly speeches. We had heard next to nothing from Republicans about climate change since the 2010 Citizens United decision. That decision let loose the fossil fuel industry to cast an ever darker shadow of intimidation across this town. So this minor outbreak of dialogue, although minor, has been significant.

All but one of my Republican colleagues is now on the record saying they agree that climate change is real, and 15 voted that it is caused at least in some part by humans. That is some progress. Yet some still persist in their denial. Our scientists now tell us that warming of the climate system is "unequivocal." Yet we equivocate. Scientists are a careful bunch. When they say something is unequivocal, we ought to take note.

The senior Senator from Oklahoma, our chairman of the Environmental and Public Works Committee, however, maintains that human-caused climate change is a hoax. He thinks it is arrogant to say that humans could cause the climate to change. What is really arrogant is thinking we can ignore the laws of nature, the laws of physics, the laws of chemistry, the laws of biology. Whose laws do we think those are? Those laws were given to us by our Creator. They came with this world. They are immutable.

These laws of nature dictate that carbon dioxide is the byproduct of our burning of fossil fuels. These laws of nature, fresh from the hands of our Creator, explain why carbon traps heat in our atmosphere—something we have known since Abraham Lincoln was riding around this town in his top hat.

Here in the Senate, we have no human power to amend or repeal those laws—and here in the Senate, we shouldn't cherry-pick from the scientific record. That is not fair play. Here on the floor, the EPW chairman paraphrased a 2013 paper from the journal *Nature*, saying: