

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