

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 3, 2015

COMMITTEES:
APPROPRIATIONS
BUDGET
HEALTH, EDUCATION,
LABOR, AND PENSIONS
HOMELAND SECURITY
AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

The Honorable Johnny Isakson
Chairman
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Russell Senate Office Building, Room 412
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Richard Blumenthal
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Russell Senate Office Building, Room 412
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Isakson and Ranking Member Blumenthal:

I am writing to express my gratitude for your leadership in securing Senate passage of H.R. 203, the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans (SAV) Act. This critical piece of legislation, the Senate companion of which I proudly cosponsored, will make important improvements to mental health care and suicide prevention programs at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. As you begin to draft a Committee report to accompany H.R. 203, I write to request that you include language clarifying that opioid prescribing practices should be covered as part of the bill's third-party evaluation of Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) mental health care and suicide prevention programs.

At a time when 8,000 veterans a year are committing suicide and an increasing number of men and women are returning from war struggling with mental health issues, the Clay Hunt SAV Act is a much-needed step forward. I am particularly supportive of the bill's requirement for an annual, independent, and comprehensive evaluation of the VA's mental health and suicide prevention programs. In my home state of Wisconsin, there have been extremely troubling instances of the overprescribing of opioids at the Tomah VA Medical Center, including to veteran patients with mental health issues. There are significant risks associated with the use of opioids, including potential dangerous interactions with prescription medications used to treat mental illness, and these addictive medications should not be casually prescribed or absent strict monitoring.

Veterans experiencing chronic pain, many of whom are prescribed opioids to manage it, also experience higher rates of mental health co-morbidities like PTSD and depression. For example, according to a May 2014 VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) report (No. 14-00895-163) on opioid therapy practices, approximately 64% of patients prescribed take-home opioids had been diagnosed with mental health issues. A subset of this veteran population received prescriptions for drugs in the benzodiazepines (BZD) class—addictive drugs that are commonly used to treat PTSD, depression, anxiety, and Military Sexual Trauma, among other issues. This is a cause for

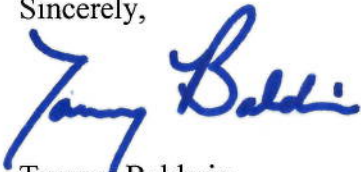
alarm. Indeed, according to the same OIG report, “the concurrent use of benzodiazepines and opioids can be dangerous because both depress the CNS [central nervous system]. Benzodiazepines have been strongly associated with death from opioid overdose.”

While I understand that the VA has launched a “Psychopharmacology” initiative to look into this matter, I believe that a third-party review of both the VA’s clinical guidelines and standard of care for the use of opioids by patients concurrently in mental health and suicide prevention treatment programs is warranted. Accordingly, I request that the Committee include the following language in its report to accompany H.R. 203:

Regarding Section 2, “the Committee intends that the required ‘evaluations of mental health care and suicide prevention programs’ described in this provision will include a review of the use of opioids by patients in those programs. Accordingly, the Committee directs the Secretary to include such a review in the evaluation. ”

Last Congress, your Committee held a hearing investigating the problem of overmedication throughout the VA network, and the passage of the Clay Hunt SAV Act is an opportunity to build on that essential oversight work by ensuring the bill’s third-party evaluation includes opioid use by veterans in mental health care and suicide prevention programs. Thank you for your consideration of my request and all that you do in support of our nation’s veterans.

Sincerely,



Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator