



**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

June 23, 2025

The Honorable Douglas Collins  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Ave., NW  
Washington, DC 20420

The Honorable Pete Hegseth  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Defense  
1000 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Secretary Collins and Secretary Hegseth:

I write today to inform you that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Department of Defense (DOD) are the most recent recipients of my Golden Fleece Award. I am giving this award to VA and DOD because of challenges in ensuring effective mental health screening for service members and veterans who are transitioning from military to civilian life.

As you know, thousands of our brave men and women in uniform end their service to our country and transition back into civilian life each year. This transition is a critical time for these men and women, and research has shown it to be a uniquely vulnerable one as well. According to a 2018 study, the suicide rate for veterans in their first year of separation from military service is two and a half times higher than that of active-duty service members.<sup>1</sup>

To address this, President Trump signed Executive Order No. 13822 in 2018.<sup>2</sup> Titled “Supporting Our Veterans During Their Transition From Uniformed Service to Civilian Life,” this executive order directed VA and DOD to work together to ensure recently discharged service members have access to mental health care for at least one year following their discharge and required the departments to develop a joint action plan. This joint action plan was submitted to the White House on May 3, 2018.

As a result of this effort, the VA-DOD Joint Executive Committee, an interagency committee established in 2003, elected to include mental health screening as a part of a new joint Separation Health Assessment (SHA) that would be administered by both DOD and VA. These

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<sup>1</sup> Yu-Chu Shen, Jesse M. Cunha, Thomas V. Williams, “Time-Varying Associations of Suicide with Deployments, Mental Health Conditions, and Stressful Life Events Among Current and Former U.S. Military Personnel: A Retrospective Multivariate Analysis,” *Lancet Psychiatry*, vol. 3, no. 11 (2016):1039-1048,

<sup>2</sup> Exec. Order No. 13822, 83 Fed. Reg. 1,513 (Jan. 12, 2018).

screens allow medical professionals to identify individuals who are at risk for specific mental health conditions and serve as a valuable tool to indicate a need for further evaluation or intervention. The VA's Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) began using this new SHA for service members applying for disability compensation at separation on April 1, 2023. The DOD has not yet implemented the joint SHA but completed a pilot program in January 2025 at three military medical treatment facilities.

In addition to President Trump's executive order, the House report that accompanied the Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 National Defense Authorization Act included a provision that directed the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to conduct a review of DOD and VA's implementation of the joint SHA. The findings of this review were released to the public on June 5, 2025.<sup>3</sup>

As a part of this review, GAO assessed the extent to which VA and DOD based the joint SHA's mental health screening questions on validated screening tools. According to page 10 of the GAO report, these validated screenings have "been tested and determined to be both effective at identifying individuals at risk for a specific condition and reliable at yielding consistent results if administered to the same individual more than once." However, the GAO further states on page 22 that when a screening is based on a validated tool but modified from its original validated form, it may not be a reliable measure of the risk of a mental health condition. Furthermore, page 15 of the report notes that if a screening is not validated at all, it casts even more doubt on the reliability and accuracy of the results.

The joint SHA developed under the VA-DOD Joint Executive Committee includes five mental health screens to identify risks for depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), alcohol abuse, suicide, and violence. However, GAO found that only two of these screens, those for depression and suicide risks, are based on validated screening tools. The screens for PTSD and alcohol abuse are based on validated tools but were modified without the proper validation required, and the joint SHA's screen for risk of violence was not based on any validated tool at all. As a result, GAO notes that the DOD and VA cannot be sure these screens produce accurate or reliable results unless the joint SHA's existing screens for alcohol use, PTSD, and violence are properly validated. Considering the vulnerability of our service members during their transition back into civilian life, it is essential that DOD and VA ensure their efforts to identify those in need of mental health support are effective.

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<sup>3</sup> U.S. Government Accountability Office. Military to Civilian Transition: Actions Needed to Ensure Effective Mental Health Screening at Separation. GAO-25-107205. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Accountability Office, June 2025

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As a result of GAO's findings, I encourage the VA and DOD to take the necessary steps to validate the joint assessment's screens for PTSD, alcohol use, and violence risk to ensure our service members and new veterans are properly evaluated for mental health conditions upon the conclusion of their military service. This validation would provide the DOD and VA with the confidence needed to ensure their efforts to identify service members in need of mental health support are effective.

Arkansas's Second Congressional District is home to many of our brave veterans and service members at Little Rock Air Force Base and Camp Robinson, and I am committed to ensuring that our veterans, service members, and their families receive the care and benefits they have earned and deserve. Throughout my time in Congress, I have been proud to support legislation that supports the brave men and women in uniform in central Arkansas and across our nation who have selflessly sacrificed everything for our country.

Should you require any additional authority from Congress to address these concerns, I urge you to notify us as soon as possible. I would also welcome any technical assistance you could provide to Congress to correct statutory issues that may have contributed to this problem. Thank you for your consideration, and I look forward to working with you to address this important issue.

Sincerely,



French Hill  
Member of Congress