

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON MILITARY AND VETERANS' AFFAIRS

March 17, 2015

1:03 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Bob Herron, Chair
Representative Gabrielle LeDoux, Vice Chair
Representative Jim Colver
Representative Shelley Hughes
Representative Bob Lynn
Representative Max Gruenberg
Representative Chris Tuck

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION: JOINT ALASKA STATE LEGISLATIVE VETERANS CAUCUS

- HEARD

SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 7

Supporting the construction by American Indian Veterans Memorial, Inc., of an Alaska Native, American Indian, and Native Hawaiian veterans' monument in the nation's capital.

- MOVED SJR 7 OUT OF COMMITTEE

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: SJR 7

SHORT TITLE: NATIVE AMERICAN VETERANS' MONUMENT

SPONSOR(S): SENATOR(S) WIELECHOWSKI

01/21/15	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/21/15	(S)	STA
02/19/15	(S)	STA AT 9:00 AM BUTROVICH 205
02/19/15	(S)	Moved SJR 7 Out of Committee
02/19/15	(S)	MINUTE(STA)
02/20/15	(S)	STA RPT 5DP
02/20/15	(S)	DP: STOLTZE, WIELECHOWSKI, COGHILL, HUGGINS, MCGUIRE
02/27/15	(S)	TRANSMITTED TO (H)

02/27/15 (S) VERSION: SJR 7
03/02/15 (H) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
03/02/15 (H) MLV
03/17/15 (H) MLV AT 1:00 PM CAPITOL 120

WITNESS REGISTER

ERIC HOLLEN, Veterans Affairs Specialist
Joint Alaska State Legislative Caucus
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided a PowerPoint presentation entitled "PTSD & Suicide Rates for Veterans Post 9/11," and dated 3/17/15.

RICK FRY
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Participated in the presentation by the Joint Alaska State Legislative Veterans Caucus.

CORY SHOUSE
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Participated in the presentation by the Joint Alaska State Legislative Veterans Caucus.

SENATOR BILL WIELECHOWSKI
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Speaking as the sponsor, introduced SJR 7.

KALYSSA MAILE, Staff
Senator Bill Wielechowski
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: On behalf of Senator Wielechowski, sponsor, answered questions during the hearing on SJR 7.

ELIZABETH BATES
Hollywood, Florida

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SJR 7.

STEPHEN BOWERS
Hollywood, Florida

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified during the hearing on SJR 7.

MARCELO QUINTO, President
Alaska Native Brotherhood Camp 70

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SJR 7.

OZZIE SHEAKLEY, Commander
Southeast Alaska Native Veterans
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SJR 7.

MARY A. BROWN, Executive Committee
Alaska Native Sisterhood
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SJR 7.

IRVING LANGMAID, President
Alaska Native Brotherhood Camp 9
Klawock, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SJR 7.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[1:03:38 PM](#)

CHAIR BOB HERRON called the House Special Committee on Military and Veterans' Affairs meeting to order at 1:03 p.m. Representatives Tuck, Gruenberg, Hughes, and Herron were present at the call to order. Representatives Colver, Lynn, and LeDoux arrived as the meeting was in progress.

PRESENTATION: JOINT ALASKA STATE LEGISLATIVE VETERANS CAUCUS

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CHAIR HERRON announced that the first order of business would be a presentation by the Joint Alaska State Legislative Veterans Caucus.

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ERIC HOLLEN, Veterans Affairs Specialist, Joint Alaska State Legislative Caucus, Alaska State Legislature, informed the committee the number of veterans who commit suicide has been the focus of his education as an undergraduate and graduate student. He spoke with personal knowledge of a close friend who died while serving in Iraq, and the link between suicide and highly-trained special operators who are committing suicide after they return home. At this time, 2.2 million U.S. service men and

women have returned from the current battlefield; when service members from the Vietnam War are included, the total is 8.3 million. He opined the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is overwhelmed with the following numbers: 20.3 percent of active duty veterans suffer serious symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); the rate for National Guard members is about twice; more deployments increase the likelihood of suffering PTSD; physical injury increases the rate "times two." In addition, family members of slain service members may suffer secondary PTSD (slide 1).

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REPRESENTATIVE HUGHES asked why the rate is higher among National Guard and reserve members.

MR. HOLLEN explained that often active duty members have coping strategies that last about 90 days, but there is a stigma attached to asking for help. National Guard members come from all over the state and the nation, and may not have support resources readily available, which may account for their higher rates of PTSD.

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RICK FRY [former Navy Corpsman and medic with Seal Team 8] added that active duty forces receive more training. His personal experience was that he was all right as long as he was deployed.

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CORY SHOUSE [U.S. Army Ranger] agreed that soldiers and airmen in the National Guard are removed from a support structure that could identify possible problems; facing their incomprehensible feelings alone can become overwhelming, and can lead to suicide.

MR. HOLLEN said combat veterans are susceptible to forms of self-directed violence and dangerous activities; in fact, veterans have a battlefield mentality and are "adrenaline junkies." He cautioned that these behaviors can increase over time. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimate that veterans account for 22 percent of the deaths from suicide in the U.S., although the number could be higher due to unreported cases. In 2010, 38,600 veterans died from suicide, which would equal 22 veterans dying each day from suicide. Of these, 70 percent are Vietnam War-era veterans, and 30 percent are veterans of Operation Desert Storm 1 to present-day

conflicts. Each month, 950 veterans are being treated nationally at veteran's hospitals for suicidal ideation (slide 2).

MR. SHOUSE said he was an Army Sergeant Major retired after 21 years of service. Speaking from his experience, he agreed that anyone returning from combat feels "bulletproof" after surviving in the theatre of war. Without help, his self-destructive and self-directed violence and dangerous activities would have led him to accepting that suicide was an option.

MR. FRY said he served in the Navy in multiple deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. He opined that the aforementioned percentage of suicide by veterans is higher because some accidental deaths are not recognized as suicide. He also agreed that after returning home, normal life is not exciting, and veterans take more risks. Those who commit suicide are not afraid of death because they saw it every day, and want "the nightmares and everything to stop."

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REPRESENTATIVE GRUENBERG spoke of his personal experience with the suicide of a family member who was a veteran from the Iwo Jima and Guadalcanal campaigns during World War II (WWII). At that time, he was not diagnosed with PTSD, and on 7/4/76 he committed suicide. Representative Gruenberg surmised there may be other causes contributing to problems for older service members.

MR. HOLLEN responded that research from World War I and WWII shows that there is an escalation in veterans who need help 30 years after their service; in fact, 70 percent of the suicide rate is now veterans from the Vietnam War era.

REPRESENTATIVE GRUENBERG told a personal story of his father's and his wartime experiences.

MR. HOLLEN agreed that coping strategies may break down over time.

MR. FRY observed that his way of coping was to return to service as a way to keep busy; after his injuries stopped him from functioning, he suffered a dark time, and needed outside support.

REPRESENTATIVE LYNN recalled PTSD was known as shell shock.

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MR. HOLLEN stated that one in five veterans - nearly 300,000 - from Operation Iraq Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom have been diagnosed with PTSD, at a cost of \$2 billion for treatment. Understanding that war impacts a soldier's psyche dates back to ancient Greece; this impact was known as soldiers' heart in the Civil War, shell shock in WWI, and combat fatigue in WWII (slide 3).

REPRESENTATIVE LEDOUX asked for clarification.

MR. HOLLEN explained that one in five veterans out of 2.2 million deployed overseas have been diagnosed. In further response to Representative LeDoux, he said he was unsure of the number who have been deployed in combat or close to combat. He said his understanding is that regarding improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and roadside bombs, everyone is exposed, even those assigned to office duties.

MR. FRY confirmed that mortars falling on the base and driving the roads are scary times.

REPRESENTATIVE HUGHES told a personal story of a family member who struggled with depression unless they were feeling productive and asked whether productivity plans are part of PTSD treatment.

MR. HOLLEN noted that he and Mr. Fry are involved in the U.S. Paralympic Military Program which is a community-based sports program funded by the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD).

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MR. FRY said through the U.S. Paralympic Warrior Games he met friends and enjoyed shooting and attending camp, where he could set goals and become active again.

MR. SHOUSE agreed that remaining productive and part of a community is important, but veterans must identify their PTSD and develop strategies and coping skills in order to address all of the elements they face in the future. Contributing to society is beneficial after treatment.

REPRESENTATIVE LEDOUX asked whether a certain percentage of veterans who have served stateside develop PTSD.

MR. HOLLEN said he had no research in this regard, but he has researched family members who suffered secondary issues, and advised that active duty suicide rates in the theatre of war can be higher than war casualties.

MR. SHOUSE said that veterans who are not deployed overseas lose friends and fellow soldiers. He said he has seen the impact of loss on family members.

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REPRESENTATIVE LEDOUX observed that survivors of accidents experience guilt; this may affect soldiers also.

MR. HOLLEN affirmed that mental health research shows some can feel guilt if unable to serve their country. The suicide of others has affected him deeply.

MR. SHOUSE added that those not deployed can suffer depression on a different magnitude.

MR. HOLLEN continued to explain that the warrior culture in the military is characterized by preparation and engagement in combat, and is based on the concept of war. In addition, there is a masculine-warrior image that values strength, resilience, courage, sacrifice, and mental toughness. At times, the military family is placed above one's own family (slide 4).

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MR. FRY recalled that the military culture encourages one to suppress the discussion of PTSD, although there have been some changes.

MR. SHOUSE agreed that there is stigma attached to PTSD and the label of a mental disorder; in fact, active duty members fear reprisals. Others continue to avoid diagnosis and treatment, and may suffer in the future after they leave the military and lose their support structure.

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MR. HOLLEN reviewed the military focus to integrate mental toughness and physical toughness, thus a warrior who admits to having a mental health problem might view that problem as evidence of weakness (slide 5).

MR. SHOUSE said he did not deal with PTSD until his retirement was close, and took a self-destructive path; he was aware that he and his family were suffering and he turned to the resources that were available. He expressed his concern for those who are discharged without an opportunity to benefit from resources or a support structure, and are not allowed to heal.

MR. FRY agreed that the message he heard was to live without self-pity or to be judged as weak. He decided to distance himself from his family and acknowledged that an abrupt end to his career was very difficult; however, he was fortunate to find a place to belong.

REPRESENTATIVE LYNN pointed out that during WWII, PTSD was not recognized as an invisible injury.

REPRESENTATIVE TUCK observed that in the military culture, showing compassion is perceived as weak and leads to questions about one's ability to command. He pointed out that victims of sexual assault can suffer from PTSD.

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A video was shown from 1:53 p.m. to 2:06 p.m.

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MR. HOLLEN offered his solution: More veterans need to be counseling veterans.

SJR 7-NATIVE AMERICAN VETERANS' MONUMENT

[2:07:51 PM](#)

CHAIR HERRON announced that the final order of business would be SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 7, Supporting the construction by American Indian Veterans Memorial, Inc., of an Alaska Native, American Indian, and Native Hawaiian veterans' monument in the nation's capital.

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SENATOR BILL WIELECHOWSKI, Alaska State Legislature, concurred with the suggestion that the solution to the high suicide rate for veterans is to show appreciation to those who have served. In that regard, SJR 7 supports the construction of an Alaska

Native, American Indian, and Native Hawaiian veterans' monument in Washington, D.C. Senator Wielechowski said several years ago he met with a Native American organization that wanted to honor Native Americans who fought for the U.S. by building a monument, and he suggested that they contact the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN); subsequently, AFN passed a resolution in support of this effort, a copy of which can be found in the committee packet. The effort to construct a monument is also supported by the National Congress of American Indians and Vietnam Veterans of America, and no federal or public funds will be used. To those who question the need to honor this group of veterans, Senator Wielechowski relayed that Native Americans, Alaska Natives, and Hawaiian Natives have some of the highest rates of service per capita, and have served in every conflict since the Revolutionary War - saving lives - even when denied American citizenship. He noted that many Americans have heard of the Native American code talkers, but are unaware of the service by the Tlingit code talkers. Senator Wielechowski said SJR 7 passed unanimously in the Senate and urged for the committee's support.

REPRESENTATIVE HUGHES asked whether construction of the monument is on schedule and where it will be located.

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KALYSSA MAILE, Staff, Senator Bill Wielechowski, Alaska State Legislature, answered that the monument is in the fundraising and planning stages. Although there is no official design at this time, in 1994, Congress passed a resolution - which was reaffirmed in 2013 - to allow the monument to be built on the National Mall.

REPRESENTATIVE HUGHES said it was very appropriate to honor Native Americans who have volunteered for service in high numbers during times of peace and war.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI restated that Native Americans have served in every conflict; 42,000 served in the Vietnam conflict and many who volunteered were from Alaska.

REPRESENTATIVE HUGHES expressed her support for the resolution.

CHAIR HERRON recalled that the first Alaskan killed in the Vietnam conflict was a Yupik Eskimo from Bethel in 1967.

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CHAIR HERRON opened public testimony on SJR 7.

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ELIZABETH BATES said she and her husband have been leading an effort since 2011 to garner recognition for American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Pacific Islanders on the National Mall in Washington D.C. The statute will be placed at the National Museum of the American Indian as authorized by a bill passed in 2013; however, members of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund are planning to build an education center and suggested that an American Indian, Alaska Native, and Pacific Islander exhibit should be part of the center. The exhibit will narrate the entire history of American Indian, Alaska Native, and Pacific Islander involvement in all wars and conflicts, and she expressed her appreciation for the support of the Alaska State Legislature.

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STEPHEN BOWERS stated it is very important to Indian tribes, Alaska Natives, and Pacific Islanders to have an opportunity to show their rich legacy and history in helping to defend the country. (Further testimony indisc.).

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MARCELO QUINTO, President, Alaska Native Brotherhood Camp 70, said Alaska Native Brotherhood Camp 70 is the oldest Native organization in the U.S. Mr. Quinto informed the committee he served four years in the Navy. His organization is in full support of SJR 7, and many of its present members have served in conflicts from the Korean War forward.

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OZZIE SHEAKLEY, Commander, Southeast Alaska Native Veterans, said his organization was formed in 1995 in order to work with veterans in all of the communities in a manner similar to that of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion, and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). He expressed his organization's support for the resolution, noting that at the start of WWII many members volunteered to join the military services and in 1944, enemy forces landed in Alaska and everyone that was able went to serve in the Aleutian Islands. Mr. Sheakley displayed a copy of a Tlingit Warrior code talkers'

Congressional Medal of Honor and described the story of the Navajo and Tlingit code talkers, noting that Indian languages of 32 other tribes were also used for code, and none of the codes were broken. He restated his organization's support for SJR 7.

REPRESENTATIVE LEDOUX advised that in Old Harbor fisherman today use their Native language to conceal information about the location of fish.

MR. SHEAKLEY said the medalists are gone now and most were from one clan. He described the medal.

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MARY A. BROWN, Executive Committee, Alaska Native Sisterhood, said she is the daughter of a veteran, the sister of four veterans, and the mother of a Desert Storm veteran. She shared a story of her personal family experience as the mom of a veteran after he returned home. During his service, she phoned for information and was transferred to the casualty line in error. As a member of the executive committee of the Alaska Native Sisterhood, which is celebrating its 100th anniversary in Wrangell, she thanked Alaska Native veterans, and said the resolution is very important to Alaska Native and American Indian veterans.

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IRVING LANGMAID, President, Alaska Native Brotherhood Camp 9, said he was adopted into the Eagle/Wolf/Sockeye clan. As a non-Native veteran, he said he supported his brothers and would like to see a monument honoring Native Americans, Alaska Natives, Hawaiians, and the Indian tribes of the Lower 48. A monument such as this would distinguish the military service of Indians. Mr. Langmaid turned to the subject of post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD) and opined everyone who has served suffers some form of PTSD. He spoke of his service in Germany, in the U.S., and in Korea, and of the lingering symptoms of stress. Mr. Langmaid said he puts his military training to good use today in his work and as a volunteer. He said a memorial would be appreciated.

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CHAIR HERRON, after ascertaining that no one else wished to testify, closed public testimony on SJR 7.

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REPRESENTATIVE COLVER moved to report SJR 7 out of committee with individual recommendations and the accompanying zero fiscal note. There being no objection, SJR 7 was reported out of the House Special Committee on Military and Veterans' Affairs.

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ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Special Committee on Military and Veterans' Affairs meeting was adjourned at 2:39 p.m.