
VETERANS COALITION

F O R C O M M O N S E N S E

March 14, 2017

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Paul Ryan
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Democratic Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Majority Leader McConnell, Leader Schumer, Speaker Ryan and Leader Pelosi,

As dedicated service members and members of the Veterans Coalition for Common Sense, we write to you today to express our grave concerns with legislation being considered by Congress, the Veterans 2nd Amendment Protection Act. This proposal would put America's veterans who need our support the most in harm's way by providing them with easy access to firearms. Instead of passing this irresponsible and dangerous legislation, Congress should instead do more to guarantee that all veterans have access to world-class medical and counseling services. We urge you to oppose this bill.

Our nation is facing a devastating epidemic of veteran suicide. The bill you are debating comes at a time when an average of 20 veterans commit suicide each day, two-thirds of whom do so by using a firearm. We know that non-deployed veterans are at a 61 percent higher risk of suicide compared to the American civilian population, and deployed veterans are at a 41 percent higher risk. Firearms are the most lethal means when it comes to suicide, resulting in death nine out of ten times. When vulnerable veterans have access to firearms, they can do harm not only to themselves but also to family members and loved ones. The impact of these tragedies is felt in communities across our nation.

Last week, we were pleased to hear Secretary of Veterans Affairs (VA) David Shulkin announce his intent to provide urgent mental health care services to veterans with other-than-honorable discharges. This is a step in the right direction. Over 22,000 soldiers in the Army alone have received these bad paper discharges since 2009 due to mental health conditions, and they are among the ones who most need access to comprehensive mental health services.

Veterans Coalition for Common Sense
A Project of Americans for Responsible Solutions

But they are not the only ones. In 2008, President Bush signed a law requiring all federal agencies to submit the names of individuals who are legally prohibited from possessing guns to the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS). Since then, the VA has submitted over 174,000 names of servicemen and women who require a fiduciary to manage their benefits and have been determined through clear and convincing evidence to meet the federal standard for gun prohibition. Of these 174,000, 19,000 are individuals that suffer from schizophrenia and another 15,000 have severe PTSD.

For these individuals, possession of a firearm could be fatal. The Veterans 2nd Amendment Protection Act would put at risk the safety of these veterans and our communities by changing the standard for gun prohibition, so the VA's determinations would no longer stop a veteran from obtaining a gun. Instead, the names of veterans already in the background check system would be erased, putting them at much greater risk of self-harm. This would be irresponsible, dangerous, and life threatening to those who need access to care, not weapons.

Just last year, Congress worked to ensure that all veterans have appropriate due process protections in place through the 21st Century Cures Act. This codified existing practice and guaranteed that individuals who disagree with their final adjudication have the ability to appeal this determination.

We appreciate your service to your country in the United States Congress, and look forward to working with you to support and protect our men and women in uniform and their communities. In doing so, we urge you to oppose the Veterans 2nd Amendment Protection Act. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Admiral Thad Allen, USCG (Ret.)
General Peter W. Chiarelli, USA (Ret.)
General Wesley Clark, USA (Ret.)
General Michael V. Hayden, USA (Ret.)
General James T. Hill, USA (Ret.)
General Stanley A. McChrystal, USA (Ret.)
Admiral Eric T. Olson, USN (Ret.)
General David H. Petraeus, USA (Ret.)
Lieutenant General Mark Hertling, USA (Ret.)
Lieutenant General Russel Honoré, USA (Ret.)
Lieutenant General Claudia J. Kennedy, USA (Ret.)
Lieutenant General Norman R. Seip, USAF (Ret.)
Rear Admiral James "Jamie" A. Barnett, USN (Ret.)
Brigadier General Stephen A. Cheney, USMC (Ret.)