

Obama signs veterans suicide prevention bill

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President Barack Obama hugs Susan Selke next to Richard Selke, left, the parents of Clay Hunt, after signing into law the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act, named for Clay Hunt, which calls for evaluation of existing Veterans Affairs mental health and suicide prevention programs and expands the reach of these programs for veterans, Thursday, Feb. 12, 2015, at the White House in Washington. The bill is named for Clay Hunt of Texas, a Marine Corps combat veteran who struggled with post-traumatic stress disorder after serving in Iraq and Afghanistan and who killed himself in March 2011 at the age of 28.(AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

Acknowledging the struggles of the nation's veterans, President Barack

Obama on Thursday signed legislation intended to reduce the high rate of suicide that is claiming the lives of soldiers and former members of the military by the day.

"If you are hurting, know this. You are not forgotten," Obama said as he prepared to affix his signature to the law amid a rare bipartisan gathering at the White House.

The law, which had broad support from Republicans and Democrats, requires the Pentagon and Veterans Affairs Department to submit to independent reviews of their suicide prevention programs and make information on suicide prevention more easily available to veterans.

The law also offers financial incentives to psychiatrists and other mental health professionals who agree to work for the VA and assist military members as they transition from active duty to veteran status. A 2013 VA study reported that veterans were committing suicide at a rate of 22 a day in 2010, with nearly 70 percent of them being 50 years old or older. The incidence of post-traumatic stress among soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan has also attracted widespread attention.

"Too many of our troops and veterans are still struggling," Obama said. "They are recovering from injuries; they are mourning fallen comrades; they're trying to reconnect with family and friends who can never fully understand what they went through in war theater.

"For many of them, the war goes on in the flashbacks that come rushing forward, and the nightmares that don't go away," Obama said.



President Barack Obama signs the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act, named for Clay Hunt, which calls for evaluation of existing Veterans Affairs mental health and suicide prevention programs and expands the reach of these programs for veterans, Thursday, Feb. 12, 2015, at the White House in Washington. The bill is named for Clay Hunt of Texas, a Marine Corps combat veteran who struggled with post-traumatic stress disorder after serving in Iraq and Afghanistan and who killed himself in March 2011 at the age of 28. With the president from left are Susan Selke and Richard Selke (partially obscured) the parents of Clay Hunt, Sen. Joe Donnelly, D-Ind., Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., Paul Rieckhoff, founder of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., Bonnie Carroll, President and Founder, Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS), and first lady Michelle Obama. (AP Photo/Jacquelyn Martin)

The bill carries the name of Clay Hunt, a 26-year-old Marine veteran who struggled with post-traumatic stress disorder after serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. Hunt killed himself in 2011 in Texas.

"He suffered physical injuries that healed, and he suffered invisible wounds that stayed with him," Obama said. "By all accounts he was selfless, and he was brave."

Among those who attended the signing were Republican Sens. John McCain, a frequent critic of Obama's military policy, and Johnny Isakson of Georgia, the new chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee.

Obama singled out McCain, a Vietnam veteran and former POW, as "somebody who knows a little bit about service."

Members of Hunt's family also attended the ceremony, as did one of his close friends, Jake Wood, who introduced Obama.

"Clay's parents are Texas Republicans, that's just not just run-of-the-mill Republicans," Obama said. "And they worked with the entire spectrum—conservatives, liberals—and that's just a reminder of what we can accomplish when we take a break from the partisan bickering that so often dominates this town."

In an interview earlier this week, Hunt's mother, Susan Selke, said the bill signing would release a mix of emotions.

"I am sorry and sad that when our son needed the mental health care that he was promised when he joined the Marines, it wasn't there for him," she said. "But today our government is taking a very important step in honoring its promise to our veterans. It is too late for Clay, but we can help - we can save - the other vets who need care."

McCain this week said Hunt's story has "directed attention and inspired action for all those who have suffered from the serious shortcomings of our VA health system."

"We still have a long, long way to go to reduce the rate of suicide among our veterans, but this bill is an important step forward in fulfilling our promise to the men and women who have sacrificed on our behalf and to whom we are forever indebted," McCain said.

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