

WASHINGTON – U.S. Rep. Harry E. Mitchell today welcomed VA plans for a new public awareness campaign designed to reach veterans at risk for suicide, and let them know where to find help. The campaign will begin July 21 with a three-month pilot program which will include a television public service announcement featuring “Forrest Gump” co-star Gary Sinise.

The VA announced the new campaign at a hearing held today by the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations. Mitchell, who serves as chairman of the subcommittee, has repeatedly called upon the VA to increase outreach to veterans who need mental health service and are at risk for suicide.

“I am encouraged by today’s hearing,” said Mitchell. “The actions outlined today will save lives and show veterans we will do everything we can to keep our promise in giving our veterans the care they deserve.”

The VA’s three-month Washington-based pilot program will consist of more than 300 ads on D.C. Metro trains, as well as ads on D.C. Metro buses. The pilot program will also feature twelve ads in D.C. Metro stations and a television public service announcement. The ads will feature a silhouette of a soldier kneeling in front of an American Flag that reads, “It takes the courage and strength of a warrior to ask for help. If you’re in an emotional crisis call 1-800-273-TALK.” [Source: July 14, 2008 CBS News]

## VA Reverses Policy, Lifts Ban on Television Advertising

In June, Secretary of Veterans' Affairs James Peake personally notified Mitchell by phone of his decision to reverse Department policy and lift the long-standing self-imposed ban on television advertising in order to improve outreach to service men and women who suffer from mental health disorders when returning from war.

The Secretary's decision followed months of questions by Mitchell about the VA's efforts to reach veterans who may be at risk for suicide and have not already sought assistance from the VA. Out of a veteran population of about 25 million – only 7.8 million are enrolled to receive health care services from the VA and only 5.5 million were actually treated last year.

In May, Peake publicly apologized to Mitchell for the VA's failure to produce documents requested by Mitchell relating to the VA's efforts to conduct outreach to veterans at risk for suicide. After April, after months of failing to respond to Mitchell's document request, the VA told Mitchell to "go file a freedom of information act request." [Source, CNN] [Source, The Associated Press

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In response to a threat by Mitchell to pursue a subpoena, the VA began producing documents on May 9, 2008.

On June 4, 2008, Mitchell and Rep. Ginny Brown-Waite (R-Fla) asked the Committee to examine the VA's prohibition on TV advertising as a means to conduct outreach to veterans at risk for suicide. Brown-Waite is Ranking Republican Member of the House Subcommittee Mitchell chairs.

Citing conflicting statements by VA officials about whether the VA had the authority to make use of TV advertising, Mitchell and Brown-Waite asked, in a letter to Chairman Bob Filner and Ranking Member Steve Buyer, "that the full Committee use its resources to explore the potential efficacy of a broadcast public awareness campaign as a means of conducting outreach to veterans at risk for suicide.