

ASSEMBLY MILITARY AND VETERANS' AFFAIRS
COMMITTEE

STATEMENT TO

ASSEMBLY, No. 5177

STATE OF NEW JERSEY

DATED: JANUARY 25, 2021

The Assembly Military and Veterans' Affairs Committee reports favorably Assembly Bill No. 5177.

This bill requires the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs to establish a Bereavement Counseling Program for family members and volunteer caregivers of veterans who die by suicide.

The department, through its regional network of Veteran Service Officers will provide the family members and volunteer caregivers with information and an application for the program, when it is aware that the cause of death of a veteran is by suicide, and provide assistance with completing and filing the forms. A funeral director will also provide the information, application, and assistance when it is known that the cause of death of a veteran in their custody is by suicide.

The bill requires the department to match the family members and volunteer caregivers with clinicians. No fee will be charged to the family member or volunteer caregiver, and the clinicians will donate their time. The application for bereavement counseling will be available for up to five years after the death of the veteran, and counseling sessions will be available for a period of up to 24 months after an application for bereavement counseling has been approved and a clinician assigned. An individual will be eligible for a maximum of 30 counseling hours per year. The department will create a system for monitoring and verifying the donated hours.

The department will provide notice about the program on its Internet site and any other locations and manner as the department deems appropriate.

Under the bill, family member means a spouse, parent, sibling, child, or grandparent, whether of the whole or half blood or by adoption, legal guardian, romantic partner, or any person residing in the veteran's household. Volunteer caregiver means a person who is 18 years of age or older, is a member of a qualified veterans' organization, and has provided care in the form of counseling or social work to the veteran for a minimum of three months prior to the death by suicide of the veteran. This term will not include a person such as a licensed or professional caregiver, counselor, or social worker, and a person who received compensation for

services. Veteran means a person who served on active duty in the Armed Forces of the United States, or a Reserve Component thereof, including the National Guard, who was honorably discharged or released under honorable circumstances from active service and died by suicide.