

Through our oversight of the Choice Program, we recognized that more needed to be done to strengthen and streamline VA healthcare services and its community care programs. That was the genesis of the VA MISSION Act. One of the key reforms in the VA MISSION Act is that it enables veterans to seek quality healthcare services in their own communities, whether inside the VA system or from a private sector provider.

Specifically, the law requires the Department to establish access and quality standards that will be used as the framework for the VA and the veteran to decide when to get care in a VA facility and when to get care in the community. If the VA is unable to meet certain designated access standards, veterans will be given the option to receive care in the community. Last week, the VA announced the proposed new access standards to determine a veteran's eligibility for the community care that will take effect this June.

I am pleased that the VA maintained the spirit of the law in its proposed access standards. We understood that by providing additional access to community healthcare resources, there would be an added cost. As chairman of the Appropriations subcommittee that has jurisdiction over the VA, the entire committee will be closely working with the Department and my colleagues. Together, we will have the responsibility of making sure that the allocation of resources to support veterans' healthcare is spent wisely.

Oversight is also crucial to uncover negligence on the part of the Agencies charged with implementing the law. This is exactly what happened when the VA failed to fully comply with the housing stipend rates set by the Forever GI bill.

Passage of the initial GI bill after World War II was seen as a turning point in the way our Nation treated those who have served. The program is designed to give service men and women the building blocks they needed to succeed after leaving the military. The problem is, those building blocks have changed in the 70-plus years since the GI bill was first instituted. Since then, Congress modernized the GI bill when it passed the post 9/11 GI bill. After 17 years of war, it was once again time for an update.

The Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act—also known as the Forever GI bill—brings educational benefits to veterans so that they can receive them in this modern era. It became apparent, however, that the VA was implementing key provisions of the law incorrectly. When Secretary Wilkie testified before the VA Committee last September, I pressed him about the Department's failure to fully award the housing allowances for more than 340,000 Forever GI bill beneficiaries.

According to the statute, the VA should have used the Department of Defense's 2018 basic allowance for hous-

ing rates. This should have been calculated based on the ZIP Code where the student takes the majority of classes, rather than on the ZIP Code in which the school's main campus is located. Instead, some GI bill recipients were receiving housing stipends at the 2017 rate and based on the school's ZIP Code. This was clearly unacceptable.

Once it was evident that the VA was not following the statute, Congress had an obligation to act. That is why Senator SCHATZ and I introduced the Forever GI Bill Housing Payment Fulfillment Act to demand an immediate fix from the VA. That bill became law within a matter of weeks from its introduction.

With this law, what we are asking of the VA is really threefold. The first is to make every unpaid or underpaid veteran whole. The second is to be accountable for the errors that have happened and prevent them from recurring in the future. The third is to fix the problems to prevent them from recurring so that we will not go through this problem again. It is promising to see that the VA has begun to carry out some of the requirements that have been dictated in the Forever GI Bill Housing Payment Fulfillment Act.

The VA recently announced the members of the tiger team that the VA is required to assemble per the statute. For those who are unfamiliar with the term, a tiger team is a team of specialists tasked to achieve a specific goal. In this case, it is comprised of six senior benefits and IT officials at the VA who will be tasked with providing Congress a detailed plan to correct this egregious error. Hopefully, the move to quickly establish this team is reflective of the seriousness with which the Department takes this mandate. It is frustrating that it has taken another act of Congress to get to this point, but all of us are committed to ensuring that the VA follows the law as written.

In a spirit of cooperation, the leadership of the congressional committees who oversee the Department recently sent a letter to Secretary Wilkie to request that the VA work collaboratively with Congress throughout the implementation process. This message was echoed during a recent subcommittee hearing I chaired about the VA's implementation of a modern, commercial, electronic health record. It is important to ensure that the VA is able to share information with the Department of Defense and community healthcare providers while it undertakes the largest health record modernization project in the Nation's history. With all of the reforms getting underway simultaneously, it is vital for the VA to share information openly, even predecisional information, so that we can work together and have a common understanding of the impact of changes, including costs, and can assess the challenges that may arise.

The laws we pass in this Chamber are a key part of our legacy, but our oversight responsibilities are of equal im-

portance. The bipartisan manner in which the Veterans' Affairs Committee works to uphold that oversight responsibility sets an excellent example for the rest of Washington to follow.

We appreciate the hard work of Secretary Wilkie and that of his team and all of those in the VA system who work so very hard on behalf of our Nation's veterans. In working together, we can ensure that veterans receive the benefits they deserve and were promised.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Connecticut.

VICTIMS OF GUN VIOLENCE

Mr. MURPHY. I thank the Presiding Officer.

Mr. President, from time to time, I come to the floor of the Senate to share with my colleagues stories of the victims of gun violence. I had hoped the statistics that consistently show this country has a gun violence rate that is 10 to 20 times higher than those of other similar high-income nations—data that shows this continuing epidemic of mass slaughter during which we average a mass shooting almost every day—would have compelled my colleagues to action. It hasn't. So I have tried to come down to the floor as often as I can to explain who these people are and to explain the genius that has been lost from this world when lives are cut so short by gun violence—gun violence that is largely preventable in this country.

I come to the floor with an unusually heavy heart because I want to talk about some of the lives that were lost a year ago today at the shooting in Parkland, FL, at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. It was a year ago that I was actually walking to the floor to give a speech on immigration when I learned of another mass shooting. It hits hard for those of us who represent Connecticut because we are still working through the ripples of grief that never ever disappear in a community that has been shattered by an episode of catastrophic gun violence—in our case, in Sandy Hook, CT.

In February of last year, 17 students and teachers were gunned down in their classrooms at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. One of them was Peter Wang.

Peter was 15 years old. He was a U.S. Army Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps cadet. He was getting ready to celebrate the Chinese New Year with his family. His two younger siblings and many other friends called him a natural leader.

When the shooter entered the high school, Peter had a choice to make: He could run and protect himself or he could try to help his fellow students in need. He chose the latter. He chose to hold a door open to help his classmates escape. He saved other people's lives while he lost his own.

Classmate Jared Burns said: "For as long as we remember him, he is a hero."

“He yanked open a door that allowed dozens of classmates, teachers and staffers to escape,” officials said.

His middle school basketball coach said that he was just a “joyful person.” His sacrifice, according to his coach, “just made perfect sense” because he was that selfless.

Peter was posthumously accepted to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point for his heroic actions on that day.

Alex Schachter was a freshman who played the trombone and baritone in the marching band, and he loved to play basketball. He loved music so much that in middle school, he took two band classes so that he could get ready to join the marching band in high school, which was his dream. His Eagle Regiment Marching Band actually won the State championship in Tampa.

His dad said that he was just a sweetheart of a kid. He said that he just wanted to do well to make his parents’ happy.

His dream was to attend the University of Connecticut. He told everybody. He was only a freshman, but he knew where he was going to college. He wanted to go to my State, to Connecticut. He wore a UConn sweatshirt almost every single day to school. His favorite song was an old one by Chicago, “25 or 6 to 4,” which is kind of an odd choice for a 14-year-old. Yet UConn’s band actually chose to play that song at halftime at one of UConn’s football games, and UConn admitted Alex posthumously because his dream was to be a UConn Husky.

Helena Ramsay was full of laughter and had this infectious smile. She was 17 when she was shot that day. She loved all kinds of music, although she was mostly into K-pop. She had all sorts of other interests too. She was interested in human rights and the environment. She joined the school’s United Nations Club and the Christian faith-based First Priority Group. She was always looking out for her friends.

One of her friends said: “When I was stressed out from my chemistry lab that I thought I was going to fail, she calmed me down and told me that it was going to be OK.”

One of her best friends said that she was “one of the kindest people I’ve ever met.”

When the gunman walked into her classroom, she turned to her friend to make sure that her friend was safe and told her to shield herself with books. People described it as a “moment of bravery in the face of horror.”

Another hero that day was Aaron Feis. He was an assistant football coach, and he was a security guard. He threw himself in front of his kids. That is how he died that day.

The football program’s spokesperson said:

[Aaron] died the same way he lived—he put himself second. . . . He was a very kind soul, a very nice man. He died a hero.

One of his football players who had been going through leukemia treat-

ments remembered that Aaron had guided him through those treatments.

He would send me prayers. He would send me Bible scripts and just stuff to cheer up my day.

Aaron died while protecting the kids at that school.

These 4 stories are amongst those of the 17 people who died at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. Yet 93 people die every day from gun violence. Most of those are suicides. A bunch of them are homicides. Others are accidental shootings, but they are all preventable.

As we remember today the mass shooting at Parkland, it is important that even on those days on which nobody puts up on cable news a mass shooting, there are still somewhere around 90 people who die every day, and I will tell you about one of them.

Corey Dodd was 25 years old when he died last month in Baltimore, MD. That morning, he told Marissa, his wife, to stay home and rest with their 3-year-old and their 3-week-old while he took the 5-year-old twins to school. After he dropped the twins off at school and pulled up outside their home, he was shot to death. The 3-year-old was inside. Marissa had to tell her kids that Daddy wasn’t coming home.

She said:

I’ve told the kids that Daddy is done. He’s not coming back.

Their family was planning to move because Corey was looking for work, and they were going to move to wherever he found work. He had recently finished a program to earn his commercial driver’s license. Things were looking up for Corey and Marissa and their four kids.

I didn’t know Corey, but I know something about his death because I happened to be in Baltimore on that day. I happened to be at Corey’s kids’ school at the moment he was shot. I was inside that school when an announcement came over the loud speaker that there was a code green. I didn’t know what a code green meant. A few minutes later, I found out that it is what happens inside schools in Baltimore when there is a shooting in the neighborhood. They locked down the school and our classroom and pulled down the shades, and we turned off the lights. A few minutes later, the police notified us that the scene was clear, that the school was safe, and that the day could go on. Yet, unbeknownst to me, just down the hall from me inside that school were two twins whose father had been shot blocks away from that school. Their lives will never be the same.

Part of the reason we care so much about this epidemic is that it is not just the victims; it is also about the people who are left behind. Imagine going to an elementary school in which you fear for your life when you walk to and from school and where parents of your friends are shot at 10:30 in the morning. It changes their brains, the trauma these kids go through in a

school like that. It makes their little, tiny, developing brains unable to learn. There is a biological process that actually happens to these kids. That trauma is what Parkland has been going through for the last year, and that trauma is what kids in Baltimore, New Haven, Hartford, Chicago, and New Orleans go through every single day. We are ruining millions of children all across this country because of an epidemic that we could choose to solve, that we could choose to do something about.

This week, the House of Representatives had a hearing and a meeting to move forward with a universal background checks bill that is supported by 97 percent of Americans. It will pass the House of Representatives, with Republican and Democratic support, with flying colors. Do you know what that tells us? It tells us that the most important thing we could do to save lives, to cut down on the 93 people who are killed every day, is to pass that universal background checks bill. In States that have universal background checks, there is about 30 percent less gun crime and fewer gun homicides than in States that don’t have those universal background checks.

As we remember 1 year since the massacre at Parkland and as we strive to understand that this is an epidemic that takes 90 people every day, know that it is within our power to do something about it. We can’t eliminate every single gun death. We can’t stop every suicide or every homicide, but with commonsense legislation that is supported by 97 percent of Americans, we can make a big difference, and we can send a signal to would-be shooters who are contemplating violence that they should not interpret our silence as a quiet endorsement. It is up to us.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from North Carolina.

REMEMBERING WALTER JONES

Mr. TILLIS. Mr. President, I come to the floor with a heavy heart today. A colleague in the House passed away, and right at this very moment, down in Greenville, NC, we have a number of Congressmen and friends and family members congregated to celebrate the life and mourn the death of Congressman Jones.

Congressman Jones served in Congress for over 24 years. His dad served before that. Between the two of them, the Jones family has represented the eastern portion of North Carolina for 50 out of the last 53 years.

Now, Congressman Jones was somebody who was a bit of a maverick and a bit of an independent spirit on the House side, and we didn’t agree on certain measures. But I never doubted his sincerity and his heart and his commitment to North Carolina and to this great Nation.

He is survived by his wife Joe Anne of over 50 years. In fact, they were married in 1966.