

I am just amazed and so grateful that there are men and women, like the Presiding Officer, who have worn the uniform and who have served—brave men and women who wake up every day in some of the most dangerous places on the face of the Earth and do a job that would bring many of us to our knees. We look at this and say it is basically impossible.

When our veterans have done their part and come home, they find themselves facing another set of struggles. The challenges the veterans face are well documented, and we hear about them: long waits and long lines at VA hospitals and clinics, long recoveries from battle wounds that they have suffered, and severe emotional and mental health struggles that, if left untreated, could end in tragedy. There are systems in place to help our returning heroes. We just need to be using these correctly.

Earlier this year, the VA OIG—Office of Inspector General—released a report showing that the agency's system for keeping track of controlled prescriptions had almost entirely broken down. Think about that. We are in the middle of an opioid crisis in this country. There is a system in place, but the VA's system for keeping track of all of these prescriptions had almost entirely broken down. This is truly unacceptable.

Pretty much what is happening is this: The State-operated prescription drug monitoring program—or PDMP—contains valuable information about what drugs veterans are being prescribed outside of the VA healthcare system. VA clinicians are supposed to check this database before prescribing opioid-based and other controlled medications to make sure their patients—that patient in front of them, that veteran in front of them—are not receiving too many pills from multiple sources.

Get this. That Office of Inspector General report—the OIG report—showed that 73 percent of our VA patients who were prescribed opioids walked out of the pharmacy, medication in hand, without a VA clinician ever having performed the minimum required checks. So the system is there. It could be utilized, but what happens? The clinician gives the prescription but never checks the database in 73 percent of the cases.

This failure to follow through puts 19 percent of those patients at risk for problems with their care coordination, and almost half of those VA patients were under long-term care for chronic pain and were at a higher risk for opioid-use disorder and overdose.

We hear about these reports time and again, and we say: How in the world could this possibly happen? How could this be acceptable? It is not.

We look at how it has happened, and here is what we found out. It happened because the VA didn't make the rules clear enough.

Get this. Officials highly recommended that clinicians submit a

PDMP query, but they didn't explicitly state that it was required under existing VHA directives, and there were no national oversight controls to act as a backstop. So the rule is there, but a bureaucrat, a clinician, says: Well, they recommend it, but it is not required, so I will skirt that.

Along with their report, the OIG handed the VA a laundry list of recommendations, including directives to develop national oversight programs, better train their clinicians—that one should be an imperative—and embed accountability checks into the technology used to track patient care. VA officials have submitted now-approved corrective action plans, and we thank the VA Secretary for this. It is our job to make sure that they do follow through with this.

The lack of organization that turned VA clinics into unwitting pill pushers has made it almost impossible for veterans to seek help during times of mental and emotional distress.

In September, the VA published a report that confirmed our worst fears. As of 2017, there has been no significant change in veteran suicide rates. In 2017, the suicide rate for veterans in Tennessee hit 32.6 percent, which is significantly higher than the overall national suicide rate. It will take more than 1 day of recognition to fix this. It is going to take commitment and an all-hands-on-deck approach.

I am an original cosponsor of the Improve Well-Being for Veterans Act, which will help vets connect to the over 50,000 existing suicide prevention programs that are ready and waiting to be helpful. The bill will also give regulators a tool to measure how effective these programs are. It is a good start, but it is not enough.

Earlier this year, President Trump launched the PREVENTS Initiative, and we thank him for this attention to the needs of our veterans. PREVENTS establishes a cabinet-level task force responsible for finding the root causes of disconnect between veterans and helpful services from the VA and private organizations. Their job is to develop a strategy for Federal, State, and community leaders to engage with veterans, improve research and access to resources, and work from the ground up to prevent suicide.

Here is the caveat: This will work only if we remain in constant contact with veterans back home and use those interactions to find the cracks that veterans continue to fall through.

For years, we have listened to frustrated complaints from agency officials insisting that untangling the VA's procedural knots is an exercise in futility. Sometimes you hear: Well, it just can't be done. We do things this way because we have always done things this way. That is not necessarily true. We do them because oversight has not been exercised.

It is time for all of us—not just lawmakers and rulemakers—to finally accept that “honoring their service”—

honoring the service of these heroes—means helping these heroes heal when they need it and not leaving them at the mercy of a broken and bloated bureaucracy.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The majority leader.

ORDER OF PROCEDURE

Mr. McCONNELL. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that notwithstanding rule XXII, the cloture votes on the Rudofsky and Wilson nominations occur at 12 noon on Wednesday, November 6. I further ask unanimous consent that the confirmation vote on the Hunsaker nomination occur at 4 p.m. on Wednesday, November 6, and that following the disposition of the Hunsaker nomination, the Senate vote on the motion to invoke cloture on the Nardini nomination. Finally, I ask unanimous consent that if cloture is invoked on the Rudofsky, Wilson, and Nardini nominations, that the confirmation votes occur at a time to be determined by the majority leader in consultation with the Democratic leader on Thursday, November 7.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Without objection, it is so ordered.

LEGISLATIVE SESSION

MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. McCONNELL. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to legislative session and be in a period of morning business, with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

TRIBUTE TO DAN MCDANIEL

Mr. McCONNELL. Madam President, this upcoming Veterans Day gives every American the opportunity to pause and pay tribute to the many sacrifices of those men and women who served in our Armed Forces. Out of devotion to this country and our values, these brave servicemembers made the world a safer place. It is a sincere privilege to extend my gratitude to each and every one of them.

I am especially proud to recognize the nearly 300,000 American veterans who call Kentucky home. After their military service, many of these Kentuckians came home and continued selflessly giving to their communities and our Nation. In particular, I would like to pay tribute to a special Kentucky veteran today, Dan McDaniel of Kenton County. Six days after he graduated from the University of Kentucky in 1972, Dan became one of the final draftees his community sent into the Army during the Vietnam war. Following his basic training, Dan was sent with his wife, Linda, to Augsburg, Germany, as a field artillery crewman. He

served there until he received an honorable discharge that brought the couple home to Kenton County.

Using his degree in social studies, Dan taught history for a short time in Northern Kentucky. Then, a few years later, Dan and his brother Mike started a small concrete company out of their basements. For nearly four decades, Mike and Dan grew their business and earned respect in Northern Kentucky and the greater region as full service concrete contractors. In 2008, the brothers sold their business to Dan's son, Chris, who runs the company to this day.

The family business isn't the only way Chris has followed his father's footsteps, however. After graduating from The Citadel, Chris served 4 years in the Army as an infantry officer. Today, he is continuing to serve the Bluegrass State as a prominent member of the Kentucky State Senate. Like so many veterans, both Dan and Chris continue to make lasting contributions to their community, our Commonwealth, and this great Nation.

So, on this Veterans Day, I am grateful to all those who served our country in uniform. Our Commonwealth is made safer because of their service and stronger because of their example. To Dan and Chris McDaniel, all Kentucky veterans, and their families, it is an honor to say thank you.

TRIBUTE TO KATHLEEN OTT

Mr. LEAHY. Madam President, I want to recognize Kathleen "Kathy" Ott, who recently retired from her role as the Director of the Library of Congress' Congressional Relations Office after 11 years of dedicated service to the Library and to Congress.

Appointed in 2008 by former Librarian of Congress, Dr. James Billington, Kathy was sought after by the Library for her extensive experience interfacing with Congress from both the public and private sectors. As the director of the Library's Congressional Relations Office, she spent more than a decade of her career building strong bipartisan relationships between the Library, Congress, and congressional staff.

Kathy has had the privilege of serving two Librarians of Congress, Dr. James Billington and Dr. Carla D. Hayden. Kathy was instrumental in supporting Dr. Hayden's confirmation process. With the help of Kathy's tireless effort throughout the nomination process, Dr. Hayden was overwhelmingly confirmed in a bipartisan fashion by the Senate during the 114th Congress.

In her time at the Library, Kathy has shaped the Library's relationship with Congress through 3 Presidential administrations, 6 Congresses, and 11 budget and appropriations cycles, building bipartisan support for Library of Congress initiatives along the way. Additionally, she worked with 10 different chairs of the Senate Rules and Admin-

istration Committee and House Administration Committee. As a member of the Senate Rules and Administration Committee, I always appreciated Kathy's thorough and dutiful commitment to her role, the Library, and Congress.

During her tenure, Kathy has welcomed nearly 500 new Members of Congress during their freshman orientation activities hosted at the Library. She also created the bipartisan Library of Congress Caucus in the 111th Congress, which currently has 84 Representatives. Moreover, she helped to coordinate the congressional participation in the award of the Library's Gershwin Prize for Popular Song to the likes of Sir Paul McCartney, Billy Joel, Smokey Robinson, as well as other noteworthy musical artists.

In her position, Kathy also played an integral role in the launch of the Library's popular Congressional Dialogue Dinner Series in 2013, which has just concluded its 45th dinner. Marcelle and I have had the pleasure of enjoying many wonderful nights at the Library attending these delightful dinners and discussions.

Marcelle and I have had so many wonderful experiences with Kathy. I have to mention one especially. When Pope Francis came to speak to a joint meeting of Congress, Kathy had arranged to have a special Bible from the Library's collection available to be blessed by the Pope. She knew the Pope would bless it, so she arranged to have with it several religious medals and other things important to her and her family available to be a part of the blessing. I know the Pope didn't mind, and those of us there thought, "This is why we think the world of her."

Kathy has always been known as a reliable and trusted source for Library of Congress information. She will be greatly missed by Members of Congress and congressional staff alike. Marcelle and I wish Kathy the best in retirement.

BAT WEEK

Mr. LEAHY. Madam President, in the midst of fall celebrations such as Halloween or, for fans in Washington and Houston, the World Series, I want to take a moment to highlight another important annual celebration that occurred last week: Bat Week.

It is fitting that last week, the Senate approved an appropriations bill to fund the Fish and Wildlife Service. At this time each year, we join our friends at the Fish and Wildlife Service, conservation groups around the world, and bat enthusiasts to recognize the irreplaceable role of bats and to highlight our urgent fight to protect them.

Many do not know the profound impact that bats have on our environment and our economy. For an agricultural state like Vermont, bats are vital to both our ecosystem and our economy. They control pests, pollinate crops, and even spread seeds. Some

farmers would consider bats among their best friends. For years, I have worked on the Appropriations Committee to prioritize funding for habitat conservation and to stop the spread of white-nose syndrome. I am proud that the fiscal year 2020 Interior bill once again responds to the call of the bat signal and provides more than \$7 million to combat white-nose, a disease that has devastated bat communities across the country.

So once again I hope Senators will join me in recognizing the importance of bat and keep the advocacy behind Bat Week going throughout the year.

RECOGNIZING VERMONT'S MAPLE INDUSTRY

Mr. LEAHY. Madam President, Vermont sets the gold standard for the maple industry, and maple is integral to our State's economy and to our State's identity. The Vermont families and businesses that keep this sector vibrant and viable are also an essential part of the fabric of our State. I am proud to recognize one of those businesses today. Nestled along the western slopes of Vermont's highest peak, Mount Mansfield, Runamok Maple is one of the roughly 1500 sugar producers in Vermont that produce nearly half of the Nation's maple syrup. Owned and operated by Laura and Eric Sorkin, Runamok Maple exemplifies the innovation and entrepreneurship that is revitalizing communities across Vermont.

Maple sugaring is a tradition carried forward and refined by each new generation of Vermonters. The Sorkins themselves benefited from the mentorship of nearby sugar producers before launching their own business a decade ago. In 2016, recognizing an opportunity, they pumped money and energy into a diversification effort that included a retail line of flavor-infused and barrel-aged syrups, all packaged and branded for the direct sales market. Two years later, I was proud to support funding for the Northern Border Regional Commission that in turn allowed Fairfax, VT, to expand wastewater infrastructure to Runamok's new manufacturing home, an old facility that once manufactured Scrabble game tiles. The improvements enabled Runamok's expansion from 45 to 100 employees and revitalized a part of the historic town.

Through their products, writings, and creativity, the Sorkins and their outstanding staff are not only producing world-class value-added products, they are changing how people think about maple syrup. Long gone are the days when it was considered a mere condiment for pancakes. I was not surprised, then, to see Runamok Maple featured in a recent Washington Post article about the many possibilities of Vermont's sweetest export.

In recognition of the families across our State who continue to keep this bedrock Vermont sector thriving, I ask