

OPENING STATEMENT
Ranking Member Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX)

House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology
Subcommittee on Research and Technology
Subcommittee on Energy
“Empowering U.S. Veterans through Technology”
May 22, 2018

Thank you Chairwoman Comstock, Ranking Member Lipinski, Chairman Weber, and Ranking Member Veasey for holding this hearing to learn more about technologies that are being developed to help improve the quality of life for our injured veterans. This is a topic close to my own heart. Before I ran for political office, I served as the chief psychiatric nurse at the VA Hospital in Dallas. I saw up close the toll that serving in a combat zone can take on our men and women in uniform. I developed a deep appreciation for human frailty and strength alike, and I carried those lessons forward into my political career. I regularly meet with veterans in my district in Dallas to learn about the challenges they face reentering civilian life and to discuss what the federal government can be doing better to help ease this transition.

Today there are about 20 million veterans in the U.S. Advances in medical response and technology in the battlefield have meant that more veterans are surviving and returning home with traumatic injuries that meant certain death in earlier generations. The protracted conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan resulted in many of our veterans serving multiple deployments in combat zones. Even if they survived these deployments without any visible injuries, some almost certainly suffer in other ways.

Veterans experience mental health disorders, substance use disorders, post-traumatic stress, and traumatic brain injury at disproportionate rates compared to their civilian counterparts. Eighteen to 22 American veterans commit suicide daily. Younger veterans are at the highest risk. While an exact count is hard to come by, approximately 40,000 veterans today are homeless. These are statistics that should alarm us all.

Technology will not solve all of these challenges. However, technology can go a long way to aid veterans suffering from both physical injuries and mental health disorders. Continued advancements in prosthetics and exoskeletons will help improve the quality of life for veterans who have lost limbs. More accurate and wearable predictors of PTSD attacks will help veterans keep themselves and their loved ones safe. And better understanding of the range of conditions that occur in the veteran population will help medical professionals and policymakers alike develop more effective interventions.

I look forward to learning more about the technologies that today’s witnesses are working on. And I look forward to a discussion of the role that our science agencies such as the National Science Foundation and the National Institute of Standards and Technology can play in advancing these and other technologies to aid our U.S. veterans. Our veterans deserve nothing less from our nation and our government than our full dedication to helping them repair the wounds of war that they suffered on our behalf. Thank you and I yield back.