

Report on

The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism

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THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON
VETERANS' AFFAIRS

MARK TAKANO, CHAIRMAN

Any viewpoint, when expressed through violence, crosses a dangerous line. Violent conduct is not constitutionally protected speech, and it is outside the limits of the law. Ideologically motivated violence should be rejected by all of us in public office, regardless of party or politics, and it must be a bipartisan concern.

–Chairman Mark Takano

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On March 31, 2022, the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs conducted the second in a series of investigative hearings examining the incidence of domestic violent extremism within the United States veteran community.¹ The hearing had two objectives:

1. To examine key factors that place a small but growing number of military veterans at risk of radicalization and recruitment by domestic violent extremist groups; and
2. To identify and evaluate various civil society efforts to combat domestic violent extremism.

This report summarizes key findings as presented by expert witnesses from the hearing.

BACKGROUND

Domestic violent extremism is a growing problem in the United States. According to the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), "there were more terrorist plots and attacks in 2020 than in any year since the CSIS data set started in 1994."² 2021 had the second-highest number of domestic violent extremist (DVE) plots and attacks since 1994.³

While motivations for these plots and attacks span the ideological spectrum, domestic violent extremism is predominantly a far-right phenomenon. Of 893 DVE crimes committed in the U.S. between 1994 and 2020, 57% were committed by right-wing actors, such as white supremacists, anti-government extremists, anti-abortion activists, and involuntary celibates (aka "incels").⁴ By comparison, 25% of DVE plots and attacks were committed by left-wing terrorists, 15% by religious terrorists (including Salafist jihadists), 3% by ethnonationalists, and less than 1% by terrorists with other motives.⁵

There have been many examples of DVE crimes committed by veterans over the past three decades. These include the Atlanta Olympic Park bombing in 1996,⁶ the

1 House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, *Hearing on Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism*, 117th Cong. (March 31, 2022).

2 Center for Strategic & International Studies, *The Military, Police, and the Rise of Terrorism in the United States* (April 12, 2021) (www.csis.org/analysis/military-police-and-rise-terrorism-united-states).

3 Center for Strategic & International Studies, *Pushed to Extremes: Domestic Terrorism amid Polarization and Protest* (May 17, 2022) (www.csis.org/analysis/pushed-extremes-domestic-terrorism-amid-polarization-and-protest).

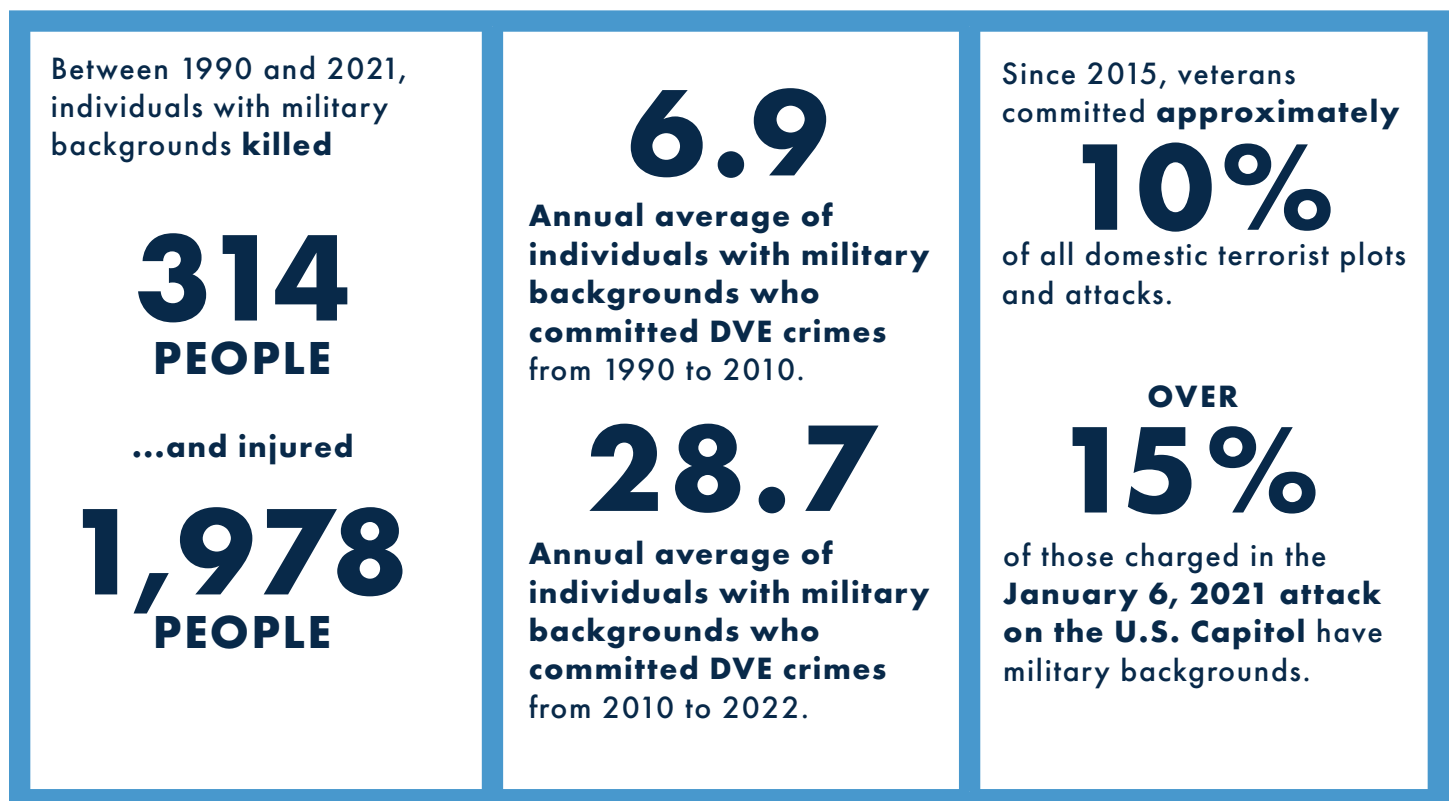
4 Center for Strategic & International Studies, *The Escalating Terrorism Problem in the United States* (June 2020) (https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200612_Jones_DomesticTerrorism_v6.pdf).

5 *Id.*

6 *Eric Rudolph's rage was a long time brewing*, MSNBC (April 6, 2005) (www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna7398701).

Wisconsin Sikh temple shooting in 2012,⁷ the 2014 killing of three people outside a Jewish community center in Overland Park, Kansas,⁸ the 2020 plot to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer,⁹ and the breach of the FBI's Cincinnati Field Office in August 2022.¹⁰ By far, the deadliest of these attacks was the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, an attack that killed 168 people (including 19 children) and injured nearly 700 others.¹¹ Timothy McVeigh planned and carried out the attack, a manifestation of his anti-government and white supremacist views, with the knowledge and assistance of two fellow Army veterans he met during basic training at Fort Benning, Georgia.¹²

It must be emphasized that the vast majority of the nation's approximately 18 million living veterans remain law-abiding citizens following their military service, and the vast majority of DVE crimes are not committed by veterans.¹³ Nevertheless, empirical evidence suggests that individuals with military backgrounds have become increasingly involved with violent extremist plots and attacks in recent years.



7 Sikh Temple Killer Wade Michael Page Radicalized in Army, Southern Poverty Law Center (Nov. 11, 2012) (www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2012/sikh-temple-killer-wade-michael-page-radicalized-army).

8 Southern Poverty Law Center, Frazier Glenn Miller, (www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/frazier-glenn-miller).

9 Two men arrested in plot to kidnap Michigan governor were Marine veterans, Marine Corps Times (Oct. 10, 2020) (www.marinecorps-times.com/news/your-marine-corps/2020/10/10/two-men-arrested-in-plot-to-kidnap-michigan-governor-were-marine-veterans/).

10 Gunman in FBI attack was Navy veteran who once handled classified info, The Washington Post (Aug. 12, 2022) (www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/08/12/fbi-cincinnati-ricky-shiffer/).

11 Federal Bureau of Investigation, Oklahoma City Bombing (www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/oklahoma-city-bombing).

12 University of Missouri – Kansas City, The Oklahoma Bombing Conspirators (<http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/mcveigh/conspirators.html>).

13 National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, Radicalization in the Ranks: An Assessment of the Scope and Nature of Criminal Extremism in the United States Military (Jan. 17, 2022) (www.start.umd.edu/pubs/Final%20Report%20for%20SAF%20CDM.pdf).

The following data illustrate this concern:

- From 1990 through 2021, DVE attacks perpetrated by individuals with military backgrounds killed 314 people and injured another 1,978.¹⁴
- Veterans committed approximately 10% of all domestic terrorist plots and attacks since 2015,¹⁵ and more than 15% of those charged in the January 6, 2021, U.S. Capitol attack have military backgrounds.¹⁶ Both percentages exceed veterans' share of the overall U.S. population (less than 6%).¹⁷
- From 1990 to 2010, an annual average of 6.9 individuals with U.S. military backgrounds committed DVE crimes. That number more than quadrupled to 28.7 individuals per year between 2010 and 2022. This dramatic increase is driven in part by the outsized number of DVE crimes committed by active duty servicemembers and veterans in connection with the events of January 6, 2021. However, even if Capitol offenders are not considered, the number of DVE crimes committed by individuals with military backgrounds (17.8 per year) more than doubled since 2010 compared to the previous two decades.¹⁸

Acknowledging the unfortunate reality that violent extremism is a small but growing threat among the U.S. veteran population does not impugn all veterans. Rather, ignoring the threat of veteran-involved violent extremism does a disservice to those who continue to support and defend the Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic, following their military service.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ Center for Strategic & International Studies, *The Military, Police, and the Rise of Terrorism in the United States* (April 12, 2021) (www.csis.org/analysis/military-police-and-rise-terrorism-united-states).

¹⁶ National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, *Radicalization in the Ranks: An Assessment of the Scope and Nature of Criminal Extremism in the United States Military* (Jan. 17, 2022) (www.start.umd.edu/pubs/Final%20Report%20for%20SAF%20CDM.pdf).

¹⁷ *The Changing Face of America's Veteran Population*, Pew Research Center (Apr. 5, 2021) (www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/04/05/the-changing-face-of-americas-veteran-population/#:~:text=There%20are%20around%2019%20million,the%20total%20U.S.%20adult%20population).

¹⁸ National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, *Radicalization in the Ranks: An Assessment of the Scope and Nature of Criminal Extremism in the United States Military* (Jan. 17, 2022) (www.start.umd.edu/pubs/Final%20Report%20for%20SAF%20CDM.pdf).

These data underscore the need for a clear-eyed discussion about the growing threat of veteran radicalization and recruitment by DVE groups. Acknowledging the unfortunate reality that violent extremism is a small but growing threat among the U.S. veteran population does not impugn all veterans. Rather, ignoring the threat of veteran-involved violent extremism does a disservice to those who continue to support and defend the Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic, following their military service. It also has potential to tarnish the reputation of those who have honorably served, hinder future recruitment efforts, and widen the divide between the civilian population and what has become an all-volunteer military. As one witness at the March 31, 2022, hearing stated, “Who is going to join an all-volunteer military if that all-volunteer military is associated with extremism?”¹⁹

The Committee’s examination of the prevalence and nature of violent extremism within the veteran community is not an attempt to police thought, silence dissent, or label any political ideology as inherently extremist. Rather, the Committee is focused on preventing violence. Veterans and all U.S. citizens enjoy certain constitutional protections regarding their right to speak freely, peaceably assemble, and petition the government for a redress of grievances.²⁰ However, as Chairman Takano stated at the outset of the March 31, 2022, hearing:

*Any viewpoint, when expressed through violence, crosses a dangerous line. Violent conduct is not constitutionally protected speech, and it is outside the limits of the law. Ideologically motivated violence should be rejected by all of us in public office, regardless of party or politics, and it must be a bipartisan concern.*²¹

Ranking Member Bost echoed this sentiment during the March 31, 2022, hearing, saying, “Free speech must be protected, but violence cannot be tolerated. Violence has no place in our society, our politics on either side of the aisle.”²²

Only by acknowledging and frankly discussing the growing threat of veteran radicalization and recruitment by DVE groups can policymakers, civil society organizations, and veterans and military families themselves formulate effective solutions for countering violent extremism.²³

19 House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, *Hearing on Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism*, 117th Cong. (March 31, 2022).

20 U.S. Const. amend. I.

21 House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, *Hearing on Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism*, 117th Cong. (March 31, 2022).

22 *Id.*

23 House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, *Hearing on Domestic Violent Extremist Groups and the Recruitment of Veterans*, 117th Cong. (Oct. 13, 2021).

DOMESTIC VIOLENT EXTREMISM:

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) define a Domestic Violent Extremist (DVE) as: “An individual based and operating primarily within the United States or its territories without direction or inspiration from a foreign terrorist group or other foreign power who seeks to further political or social goals wholly or in part through unlawful acts of force or violence. The mere advocacy of political or social positions, political activism, use of strong rhetoric, or generalized philosophic embrace of violent tactics may not constitute extremism, and may be constitutionally protected.”

Federal Bureau of Investigation, Department of Homeland Security, Strategic Intelligence Assessment and Data on Domestic Terrorism (May 2021) ([fbi.gov/file-repository/fbi-dhs-domestic-terrorism-strategic-report.pdf/view](https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/fbi-dhs-domestic-terrorism-strategic-report.pdf/view)).

HEARING OVERVIEW

The Committee conducted an initial hearing into domestic violent extremist groups and the recruitment of veterans on October 13, 2021. The purpose of the October 2021 hearing was threefold:

1. To define the nature and scope of threats posed by DVE groups that seek to recruit and radicalize veterans;
2. To understand why these groups target veterans in their recruitment efforts; and
3. To examine some of the risk factors that may lead a veteran down the path to extremism.²⁴

Key findings of the 2021 hearing include:

1. DVE groups, such as the Oath Keepers,²⁵ Proud Boys,²⁶ and Three Percenters,²⁷ target veterans for their combat experience, weapons training, and leadership/operational skills;
2. Veteran involvement gives DVE groups an air of credibility, aids in further recruitment, and has a force-multiplier effect; and
3. Appeals to patriotism, social isolation, a search for community, difficulties

²⁴ House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, *Hearing on Domestic Violent Extremist Groups and the Recruitment of Veterans*, 117th Cong. (Oct. 13, 2021).

²⁵ Center for Strategic & International Studies, *Examining Extremism: The Oath Keepers* (June 17, 2021) (www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-oath-keepers).

²⁶ Southern Poverty Law Center, *Proud Boys* (<https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/proud-boys>).

²⁷ Anti-Defamation League, *Three Percenters* (www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/three-percenters).

WITNESSES – MARCH 31, 2022

JOHN HORGAN, PH.D.

Distinguished University Professor
Department of Psychology
Georgia State University

PETE SIMI, PH.D.

Associate Professor
Department of Sociology
Chapman University

WILLIAM “BILL” BRANIFF

Co-Founder and Board Member
We the Veterans

CHRIS PURDY

Director, Veterans for American Ideals
Human Rights First

VIDHYA RAMALINGAM

CEO and Founder
Moonshot

CHRIS BUCKLEY

Veteran
U.S. Army

EMMA JOUENNE

Director of Programs & Research on Extremism
Parents for Peace

JOE CHENELLY

National Executive Director
American Veterans

SARAH STREYDER

Executive Director
Secure Families Initiative

adjusting to civilian life, and online disinformation are among the factors that push and pull some veterans toward domestic violent extremism.²⁸

Having established why DVE groups target veterans in their recruitment efforts during the October 2021 hearing, the Committee’s March 31, 2022, hearing, entitled “Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism,” turned to the veterans’ side of the story. The hearing had two main objectives:

1. To further examine some of the risk factors that place a small but growing number of military veterans at risk of radicalization and recruitment by DVE groups; and
2. To identify and evaluate various civil society efforts to combat domestic violent extremism.

The March 31, 2022, hearing featured nine expert witnesses on two separate panels.²⁹

The first panel included the veteran voices of William “Bill” Braniff, an Army veteran and co-founder/board member of *We the Veterans*, and Chris Purdy, an Army veteran and director of *Veterans for American Ideals* at *Human Rights First*; two social scientists with decades of expertise studying violent extremism, Dr. John Horgan of Georgia State University and Dr. Pete Simi of Chapman University; and

Vidhya Ramalingam, CEO and founder of *Moonshot*, an organization that

²⁸ House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, *Report on Domestic Violent Extremist Groups and the Recruitment of Veterans* (March 25, 2022).

²⁹ House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, *Hearing on Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism*, 117th Cong. (March 31, 2022).

uses technology to identify and disrupt violent extremism in the digital sphere. During the hearing's second panel, the Committee heard from Chris Buckley, an Army veteran and former extremist who has led efforts to reach other veterans at risk of radicalization; Emma Jouenne, Director of Programs & Research on Extremism at the nonprofit organization Parents for Peace; Sarah Streyder, a military spouse and executive director of the Secure Families Initiative (SFI), and Joe Chenelly, a Marine Corps veteran and national executive director of American Veterans (AMVETS).

As a result of the hearing, the Committee identified two main findings:

1. There is no single pathway toward radicalization, but there are certain risk factors that veterans who engage in violent extremism often share.

The hearing witnesses noted – and further research suggests – that there is no standard pathway toward extremism. However, there are certain risk factors, including social isolation, job insecurity, unhealed trauma, substance abuse, and mental health concerns, that make some individuals, including veterans, susceptible to radicalization and recruitment by DVE groups.

2. Peer support, including support from other veterans, military families, and Veterans Service Organizations, is vital to countering the threat of domestic violent extremism.

Witness testimony highlighted the benefits of veteran peer leaders, family support systems, and Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) in preventing and responding to radicalization and recruitment by DVE groups. The witnesses detailed existing efforts to build resilience against violent extremism, including programs aimed at fostering civic engagement among the military and veteran communities, providing clear guidance to family members and friends who are concerned about a loved one's well-being, and promoting digital intervention strategies in an effort to combat online mis-, dis-, and mal-information.

RISK FACTORS:

Adverse biological and environmental conditions that increase the likelihood a person will experience a variety of negative outcomes, including the onset of delinquent and/or criminal behavior.

House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Testimony Submitted for the Record of Dr. Pete Simi, *Hearing on Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism*, 117th Cong. (March 31, 2022).

THERE IS NO SINGLE PATHWAY TOWARD RADICALIZATION, BUT THERE ARE CERTAIN RISK FACTORS THAT VETERANS WHO ENGAGE IN VIOLENT EXTREMISM OFTEN SHARE

Scientific research has shown that there is no single pathway toward radicalization and that no standard psychological profile of a violent extremist exists. Dr. Horgan emphasized this point in testimony before the Committee:

What we know from four decades of research on violent extremism is the following: No clear profile has ever been found, not just across the ideological spectrum, but even within specific groups. That is not a failure of research, rather it is the outcome of it. Terrorism today is more diverse than ever before. Men, women, children from all walks of life, all backgrounds, all religions become involved in different ways. And they end up doing different kinds of things within these groups. If anything, diversity is the profile.³⁰

Dr. Horgan and other witnesses acknowledged, however, there are certain vulnerabilities (aka “push factors” or “risk factors”) that contribute to many violent extremists’ radicalization. Dr. Simi, in his written testimony, defined risk factors as “adverse biological and environmental conditions that increase the likelihood a person will experience a variety of negative outcomes, including the onset of delinquent and/or criminal behavior.” He further noted, “Risk factors do not guarantee any particular outcome, but rather increase the odds that a particular outcome will occur.”³¹

Witnesses, including Ms. Jouenne, described common risk factors that make some individuals susceptible to violent extremism:

These vulnerabilities can wear different masks: it can be unhealed trauma (such as childhood sexual abuse, bullying); a history of addiction (alcohol, drugs, gambling); or mental and neurological problems (such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, or other forms of learning disabilities). When unaddressed, these vulnerabilities create shame, guilt or pain so buried they become unrecognizable. To be able to bear the burden of their suffering, individuals use alternative pathways to channel anger and resentment. Extremism provides a superficially appealing solution by offering an opportunity for numbing and a sense of belonging. It makes for a seductive short-cut solution that ultimately proves destructive.³²

30 House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, *Hearing on Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism*, 117th Cong. (March 31, 2022).

31 House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, Testimony Submitted for the Record of Dr. Pete Simi, *Hearing on Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism*, 117th Cong. (March 31, 2022).

32 House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, Testimony Submitted for the Record of Ms. Emma Jouenne, *Hearing on Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism*, 117th Cong. (March 31, 2022).

In the veteran context, military service, especially combat, often involves traumatic experiences and can result in mental health conditions, such as PTSD. Recent studies have indicated that 87% of U.S. veterans were exposed to at least one potentially traumatic event during their military service,³³ and the rate of PTSD within the veteran community is nearly twice as high as the general population.³⁴ Compounding these concerns, many veterans experience an identity disruption, which can be accompanied by feelings of loneliness, isolation, abandonment, or loss of significance, following their transition to civilian life.³⁵ Other more tangible factors, like difficulties accessing employment, education, housing, or healthcare, may facilitate a former servicemember's anti-government or white supremacist views, leaving a small subset of veterans vulnerable to common tropes and false dichotomies offered by DVE groups and posted to online message boards – slogans such as “veterans before illegals” and “veterans not refugees.”³⁶

To be able to bear the burden of their suffering, individuals use alternative pathways to channel anger and resentment. Extremism provides a superficially appealing solution by offering an opportunity for numbing and a sense of belonging.

– Emma Jouenne

Another area requiring further study is the role that “involuntary exits” might play in some veterans’ radicalization. According to research by Dr. Simi, an estimated 18% of individuals with military backgrounds who were indicted on federal terrorism-related charges in the 1980s and 1990s experienced some form of “involuntary exit” from the military, including a dishonorable or less than honorable discharge or failure to successfully complete special forces training.³⁷ Involuntary exits were likely contributory factors to the radicalization of two of the most prominent veteran extremists during this time period: Timothy McVeigh, who failed to complete Green Beret training after unfavorable psychological testing in 1991,³⁸ and Eric Rudolph, the Atlanta Olympic Park bomber, who

33 Blair E Wisco, et al., *Posttraumatic stress disorder in the US veteran population: results from the National Health and Resilience in Veterans Study*, *Journal of Clinical Psychology* (December 2014).

34 Jan Müller, et al., *Risk factors associated with posttraumatic stress disorder in US veterans: A cohort study*, *Plos One* (July 25, 2017).

35 House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, Testimony Submitted for the Record of Dr. Pete Simi, *Hearing on Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism*, 117th Cong. (March 31, 2022); House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, Statement for the Record of Dr. Arie W. Kruglanski, *Hearing on Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism*, 117th Cong. (March 31, 2022).

36 House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, Testimony Submitted for the Record of Mr. Chris Purdy, *Hearing on Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism*, 117th Cong. (March 31, 2022).

37 House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, Testimony Submitted for the Record of Dr. Pete Simi, *Hearing on Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism*, 117th Cong. (March 31, 2022).

38 *Timothy McVeigh Known as Dedicated Soldier, Solitary Loner*, Associated Press (Aug. 10, 1995) (apnews.com/article/69debb-4c262e35ec720f1bb7b30e5522).

was discharged from the Army for drug use in 1989.³⁹

Mr. Purdy explained how involuntary exits, and other veteran-specific risk factors, can facilitate radicalization in his testimony before the Committee:

*If you have someone who has been involuntarily discharged and then they have a need, a mental health need, a physical health need, they need to go back to school, they need ... housing because they are housing insecure, an involuntary discharge denies those services to our servicemembers at a very critical moment when they are already facing angst and grievance against the Government. It really allows an entry point and a gateway for extremist recruiters to come in and say, "You know what? The Government is really the enemy here."*⁴⁰

Mr. Buckley, in his testimony, described the role that most – if not all – of these risk factors played in his own radicalization and association with DVE groups and extremist ideologies. Mr. Buckley experienced multiple forms of childhood and wartime trauma. Growing up in Ohio, he was the victim of sexual abuse by a male family member and was severely bullied by other students at a majority minority elementary school. While deployed to Afghanistan in 2008, Mr. Buckley witnessed a friend and fellow Army National Guardsman's death during a Taliban ambush. He told the Committee that these experiences fueled his hatred of a "growing list of enemies, Muslims, gays, and blacks."⁴¹

These traumatic experiences were exacerbated by eventual drug addiction. Following a back injury he sustained during a humanitarian mission in 2009, Mr. Buckley became addicted to opioids – and later began using cocaine, psychedelic mushrooms, and methamphetamine.⁴²

Mr. Buckley also noted the impacts of an abrupt transition to civilian life and difficulties accessing VA healthcare in response to questions from Committee Members. "It took me six months to go through [pre-mobilization training] at Fort McCoy, Wisconsin," he said. "When I come home from Afghanistan, I was on my couch, drinking beer with my buddies in two weeks. That size frame was considerably inappropriate." Mr. Buckley went on to describe "a time when I was at my lowest point and I drove six hours from my home in Georgia to Birmingham, Alabama because I was aware that it was my regional office for VA." Mr. Buckley recalled telling a receptionist at the Birmingham VA Medical Center that he had a loaded handgun in his vehicle and was considering suicide if he didn't receive adequate care. Instead of receiving that care, Mr. Buckley said he was prescribed additional medication and sent home. "That discredited the VA

39 Events in Eric Rudolph's life, CNN (April 13, 2005) (www.cnn.com/2005/LAW/04/04/rudolph.timeline/).

40 House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, *Hearing on Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism*, 117th Cong. (March 31, 2022).

41 *Id.*

42 *In the Army and the Klan, he hated Muslims. Now one was coming to Chris Buckley's home.*, The Washington Post (June 5, 2018) (www.washingtonpost.com/news/local/wp/2018/06/05/feature/in-the-army-and-the-klan-he-hated-muslims-now-one-was-coming-to-his-home/).

for me, and I never went back,” he told the Committee.⁴³

In a meeting with Committee Staff prior to the March 31, 2022, hearing, Mr. Buckley also reported feelings of frustration that his military training and various certifications didn’t translate to civilian employment and that he still needed additional education in order to find a fulfilling career.⁴⁴

These experiences – and others – left Mr. Buckley vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment by domestic violent extremists. Instead of finding prosocial outlets for his anger and pain, Mr. Buckley began searching for phrases like “protecting the white race” on the Internet and was eventually connected with the Georgia White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.⁴⁵ “They did not approach me with pitchforks or burning crosses but with a plate of barbecue ribs, a Bible, and the promise of a brotherhood I missed from my days in the Army,” he told the Committee, adding in response to additional questioning, “I think that a soldier will always create his war. That is what we do. We fight. I just chose the wrong war. I was misled, and I was taken advantage of, and I allowed that to happen.”⁴⁶



43 House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, *Hearing on Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism*, 117th Cong. (March 31, 2022).

44 Chris Buckley, Meeting with House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs Staff (Feb. 15, 2022).

45 *In the Army and the Klan, he hated Muslims. Now one was coming to Chris Buckley’s home.*, The Washington Post (June 5, 2018) (www.washingtonpost.com/news/local/wp/2018/06/05/feature/in-the-army-and-the-klan-he-hated-muslims-now-one-was-coming-to-his-home/).

46 House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, *Hearing on Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism*, 117th Cong. (March 31, 2022).

PEER SUPPORT, INCLUDING SUPPORT FROM OTHER VETERANS , MILITARY FAMILIES, AND VETERANS SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS, IS VITAL TO COUNTERING THE THREAT OF DOMESTIC VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Research has shown that there is no single protective factor that can prevent radicalization or convince an extremist to disengage from violence – just as there is no single risk factor that contributes to an individual’s radicalization. However, witnesses at the March 31, 2022, hearing agreed that peer support has proven to be instrumental in both prevention and intervention efforts as it counteracts one of the key risk factors to violent extremism: social isolation. As Dr. Horgan stated in his written testimony to the Committee, peers “may be the most effective weapon in reducing the risk of radicalization to violent extremism in the first place, as well as facilitating disengagement from such movements.”⁴⁷

For veterans, peers come in a variety of forms. They can be fellow veterans, who, as Mr. Purdy noted, “are bonded by shared experience” and “speak a common language.”⁴⁸ They can be members of national, state, local, and tribal Veterans Service Organizations, such as We the Veterans and AMVETS, which were represented at the March 31, 2022, hearing by Mr. Braniff and Mr. Chenelly, respectively. VSOs and other membership organizations provide pro-social outlets and connect veterans to networks of individuals with common experiences and shared world views. As Mr. Braniff stated in his testimony to the Committee, VSOs also have direct access “to the population who may be flirting with violent extremist groups or movements” and are well-positioned to address the threat of violent extremism head on.⁴⁹

Peers can also be friends, partners, and family members. As Ms. Streyder of the Secure Families Initiative stated in her written testimony:

When a veteran becomes radicalized toward political violence, the first people in the line of fire are their immediate loved ones. ... Family members’ proximity to veterans also makes them the first line of defense against radicalization. The interpersonal connections that partners, families, and neighbors have can complement formal, official channels of information and support.⁵⁰

Many of the hearing witnesses emphasized the need for a whole-of-community response to domestic violent extremism – an approach that includes existing government programs at the Departments of Defense, State, Veterans Affairs, Homeland Security, and other federal and state agencies. This includes early prevention programs during

47 House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, Testimony Submitted for the Record of Dr. John Horgan, *Hearing on Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism*, 117th Cong. (March 31, 2022).

48 House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, *Hearing on Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism*, 117th Cong. (March 31, 2022).

49 *Id.*

50 *Id.*

basic training, military education courses, and as a central feature of the Transition Assistance Program for separating servicemembers. It is equally important that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) provide services and benefits that address veterans' basic needs (e.g., employment, education, housing, and healthcare).

According to Ms. Ramalingam's written testimony, some of the most effective prevention and intervention strategies VA can employ "build on preexisting behavioral health and other wrap-around services." She added:

Rather than develop stand-alone terrorism prevention programming, we should draw on pre-existing services ... [s]pecifically, mental health support, educational and career counselling, community outreach and family support programs, as well as adjacent fields such as suicide prevention.⁵¹

However, government-led initiatives are only able reach a portion of the veteran community that may be at-risk of radicalization and recruitment by violent extremist groups. According to data compiled by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism at the University of Maryland, 85% of 386 veterans who committed DVE crimes between 1990 and 2022 committed their crimes not immediately following their military service, but three or more years after separation

from the Armed Forces. On average, these crimes were committed 15 years after separation.⁵² Furthermore, VA statistics show that fewer than two-thirds of all post-9/11 veterans utilize the VA healthcare system for their medical and mental health needs.⁵³ These data speak to the need for veterans, military families, and Veterans Service Organizations to fill the void and connect with veterans that VA is not able to reach, providing added resilience for those who are vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment by DVE groups. "While the DOD and the VA have a role to play, neither institution has better access to the veteran community over time than the veteran and military family community

Peers may be the most effective weapon in reducing the risk of radicalization to violent extremism in the first place, as well as facilitating disengagement from such movements.

– John Horgan, Ph.D

⁵¹ *Id.*

⁵² National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, *Radicalization in the Ranks: An Assessment of the Scope and Nature of Criminal Extremism in the United States Military* (Jan. 17, 2022) (www.start.umd.edu/pubs/Final%20Report%20for%20SAF%20CDM.pdf).

⁵³ Department of Veterans Affairs, *Analysis of VA Health Care Utilization among Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), and Operation New Dawn (OND) Veterans* (January 2017) (www.publichealth.va.gov/docs/epidemiology/health-care-utilization-report-fy2015-qtr3.pdf#).

itself," Mr. Braniff said at the March 31, 2022, hearing.⁵⁴ Ms. Streyder added to this point in her written testimony:

“[T]op-down approaches will only accomplish so much – any service member, veteran, or family member will tell you that official, mandatory trainings often have mixed degrees of impact at best. In fact, for some veterans who already have anti-government leanings, these strategies may even fan those flames. That is why informal, peer-to-peer approaches are crucial to invest in as well.”⁵⁵

In line with Ms. Streyder’s comment that the partners and family members of veterans are often the “first line of defense” against extremism,⁵⁶ for Mr. Buckley, it was his wife, Melissa, who first intervened on his behalf. “She suffered as I suffered, and I was about to pass my sufferings to my young innocent son too,” he stated in his written testimony. “She gave me an ultimatum. It was going to be either her and my son or KKK and the drugs.”⁵⁷

Mr. Buckley’s wife was reportedly connected to a former neo-Nazi, Arno Michaelis, and then Parents for Peace, through a simple Internet search: “How do I get my husband out of a hate group?”⁵⁸ Eventually, Mr. Buckley was able to confront the unhealed trauma in his life and grapple with the ways in which these experiences contributed to his hatred of racial, religious, and sexual minorities. But Mr. Michaelis didn’t begin the conversation by talking to Mr. Buckley about his extremist views. Rather, Mr. Buckley told the Committee:

“He addressed my substance abuse, which we share in common. And once I was able to gain a sober mind, a sober heart was easy to follow. And I had a very real, organic, and natural relationship built with this individual by that point. I think that the value of peer support and other services that are veteran-operated, former extremist operated and contributed to are invaluable. And just like we equip our soldiers to go into combat with the best possible equipment, we should equip our organizations on the front line of dealing with violent extremism among our veteran community with the very best equipment.”⁵⁹

54 House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, *Hearing on Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism*, 117th Cong. (March 31, 2022).

55 House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, Testimony Submitted for the Record of Ms. Sarah Streyder, *Hearing on Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism*, 117th Cong. (March 31, 2022).

56 House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, *Hearing on Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism*, 117th Cong. (March 31, 2022).

57 House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, Testimony Submitted for the Record of Mr. Chris Buckley, *Hearing on Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism*, 117th Cong. (March 31, 2022).

58 *In the Army and the Klan, he hated Muslims. Now one was coming to Chris Buckley’s home.*, The Washington Post (June 5, 2018) (www.washingtonpost.com/news/local/wp/2018/06/05/feature/in-the-army-and-the-klan-he-hated-muslims-now-one-was-coming-to-his-home/).

59 House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, *Hearing on Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism*, 117th Cong. (March 31, 2022).

According to multiple witnesses at the March 31, 2022, hearing, including Dr. Simi, former extremists like Mr. Michaelis can play an important role in extricating radicalized individuals from hatred and violence. However, he noted, they should be utilized in the context of a multidisciplinary team that “adheres to ethical and legal standards from their respective professions using empirically supported interventions, whenever possible, provided by licensed providers.”⁶⁰ Mr. Buckley himself was quick to admit that “Prevention of radicalization is always better than treatment.”⁶¹ Mr. Purdy added to this point in his written testimony, stating, “Research has shown that one of the best ways to prevent extremism is to inoculate those most susceptible to that extremism. ... Once an individual has been targeted with disinformation, it becomes much more difficult to redirect their development.”⁶²

Several of the witnesses detailed their organizations’ efforts to promote this type of preventative ecosystem within the veteran community. For example, We the Veterans recently launched Vet the Vote, a nationwide campaign to recruit 100,000 veteran and military family members to become the next generation of Election Day poll workers. “If this becomes a civic norm for veterans and military families, we will never again face a shortage of poll workers,” Mr. Braniff told the Committee. “And along the way, we will deny anti-democratic forces the opportunity to question the integrity of our free and fair elections.”⁶³ Ms. Streyder and Mr. Chenelly of AMVETS, a member of the Vet the Vote coalition, also promoted increased civic engagement as a potential antidote to anti-government extremism. According to Ms. Streyder, the voter participation rate among military voters was 27% lower than the civilian electorate in the 2020 general election, and, she added, these “challenges do not vanish when a service member leaves the military, either.”⁶⁴ In addition to the effort to recruit poll workers, Mr. Chenelly described how AMVETS, following the events of January 6, 2021, engaged with leadership of its 1,200 posts nationwide to adopt a zero-tolerance policy toward violent extremism. “AMVETS took swift action, immediately denouncing the attacks on the U.S. Capitol, and declaring that any member found to have participated in the attack on the Capitol would have their membership revoked,” he stated in his written testimony.⁶⁵

Several of the witnesses also detailed direct intervention efforts employed by the organizations they represented. As the interim executive director of Life After Hate, a Chicago-based nonprofit that seeks to disrupt far-right violent extremism, Dr. Simi testified that “empathy and nonjudgment while still holding people accountable are especially important for supporting individuals’ reintegration into a pro-social life

60 House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, Testimony Submitted for the Record of Dr. Pete Simi, *Hearing on Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism*, 117th Cong. (March 31, 2022).

61 House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, *Hearing on Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism*, 117th Cong. (March 31, 2022).

62 House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, Testimony Submitted for the Record of Mr. Chris Purdy, *Hearing on Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism*, 117th Cong. (March 31, 2022).

63 House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, *Hearing on Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism*, 117th Cong. (March 31, 2022).

64 House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, Testimony Submitted for the Record of Ms. Sarah Streyder, *Hearing on Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism*, 117th Cong. (March 31, 2022).

65 House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, Testimony Submitted for the Record of Mr. Joe Chenelly, *Hearing on Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism*, 117th Cong. (March 31, 2022).

where violence is no longer promoted as a strategy to produce social change or resolve personal conflict.”⁶⁶

Ms. Streyder noted that, in addition to civics training for veterans’ and military partners and family members, the Secure Families Initiative provides “tough conversations” training, which coaches partners and family members on the best approaches for reaching a loved one who may be exposed to extremist ideologies or is active in a DVE group. Ms. Streyder told the Committee the training seeks to answer questions, such as, “How do you have a constructive relationship-building conversation about something you fundamentally disagree on without having it blow up and you go to the opposite ends of the room?” In this way, SFI seeks to “train the willing to engage the unwilling.”⁶⁷

Empathy and nonjudgment while still holding people accountable are especially important for supporting individuals’ reintegration into a pro-social life.

– Pete Simi

Ms. Jouenne explained how Parents for Peace, since 2017, has operated a crisis helpline that friends and family members can call to seek help for a loved one who has shown traits of radicalization. “Our in-house clinicians conduct interventions to help through the de-radicalization and rehabilitation process,” she explained to the Committee. She said that Parents for Peace, working with Mr. Buckley, has also designed a Trauma Recovery Program “to provide servicemembers with positive coping skills, tools and resources to maintain a balanced,

healthy, mental, emotional, and physical lifestyle, while reducing the numbers of servicemembers participating and/or being groomed into ideologies of extremism.”⁶⁸

Mr. Buckley told the Committee that his work with Parents for Peace has given him a sustainable career path, a sense of personal fulfillment, and an outlet to channel his negative life experiences into positive change for others. “While I am ashamed of my time in the Ku Klux Klan,” he told the Committee, “I am proud to be on the front lines of combating this threat and becoming an interventionist at Parents for Peace.”⁶⁹

Finally, Ms. Ramalingam, through her work at Moonshot, highlighted proactive measures that can be taken in the digital sphere to address the pervasive spread of domestic violent extremist content on far-right social media platforms, online discussion boards, and encrypted messaging apps. “In order to effectively deal with the spread of this

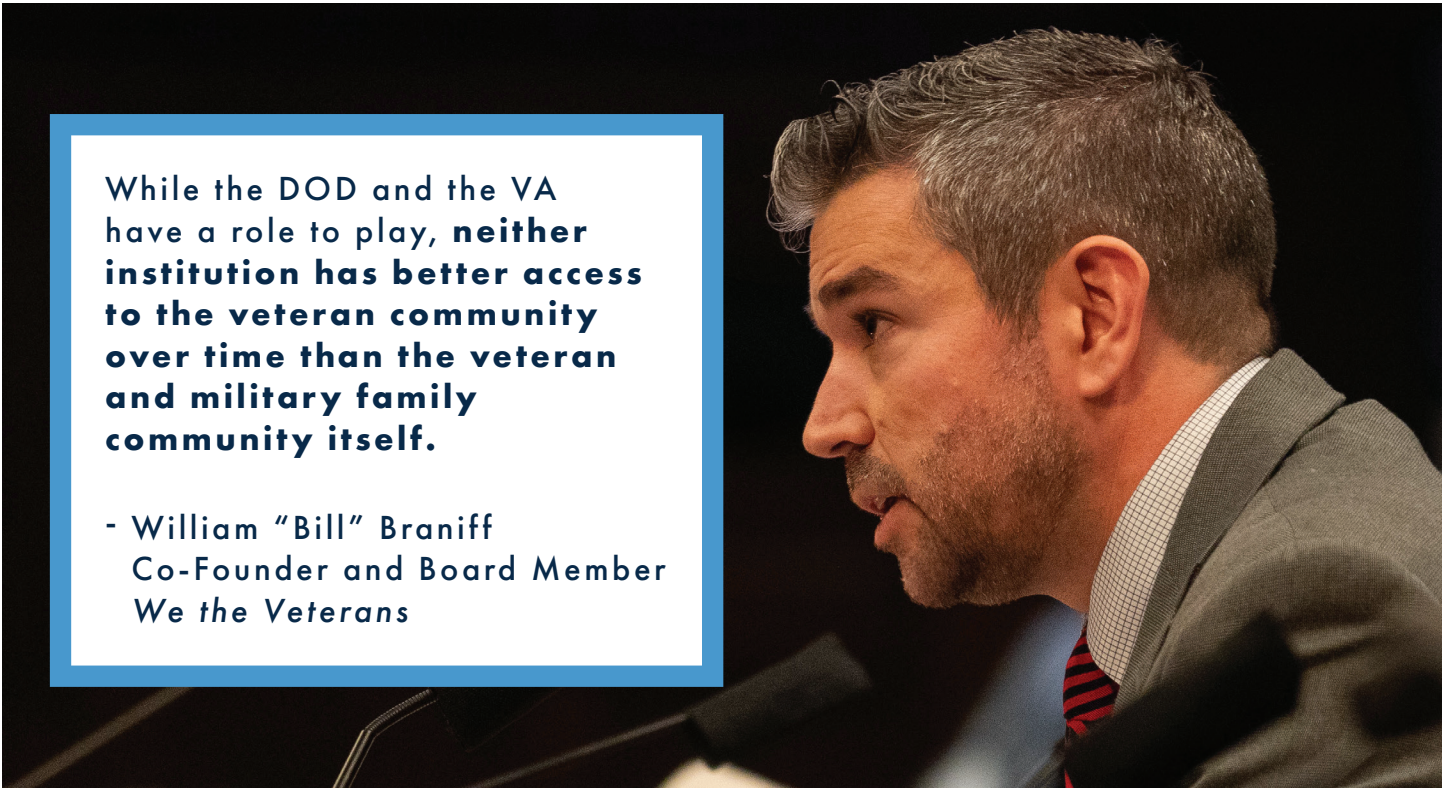
⁶⁶ House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, Testimony Submitted for the Record of Dr. Pete Simi, *Hearing on Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism*, 117th Cong. (March 31, 2022).

⁶⁷ House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, Testimony Submitted for the Record of Ms. Sarah Streyder, *Hearing on Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism*, 117th Cong. (March 31, 2022).

⁶⁸ *Id.*

⁶⁹ *Id.*

content on the internet, our solution can't just be about moderation," she told the Committee. "We have to be using these platforms to reach out to people at risk and offer them safer alternatives." Moonshot has conducted extensive research tracking extremist Google searches and analyzing the manner in which consumers of online extremist content engage with digital ads offering a range of mental health services. According to Ms. Ramalingam's testimony to the Committee, "Americans consuming extremist content online are 47% more likely than the general public to take up offers of mental health services online. This increases to 115% more likely if they are looking to join a domestic extremist group." She said the message that Moonshot tested that resulted in the highest levels of audience engagement had nothing to do with specific extremist ideologies. Rather, it began with a simple statement, "Anger and grief can be isolating," before offering available resources to targets of violent extremism.⁷⁰



While the DOD and the VA have a role to play, **neither institution has better access to the veteran community over time than the veteran and military family community itself.**

- William "Bill" Braniff
Co-Founder and Board Member
We the Veterans

⁷⁰ *Id.*

CONCLUSION

The Committee's work has shed light on the nature and scope of violent extremist groups that seek to radicalize veterans, the manner in which these groups target veterans in their recruitment efforts, risk factors that place a small, but growing number of veterans at risk of radicalization and recruitment by DVE groups, and efforts that are underway to combat domestic violent extremism among the veteran population.

Over the course of two investigative hearings, key findings include:

- DVE groups target veterans for their combat experience, weapons training, and leadership/operational skills;
- Veteran involvement gives DVE groups an air of credibility, aids in further recruitment, and has a force-multiplier effect;
- There is no single pathway toward radicalization, but there are certain risk factors, including social isolation, job insecurity, unhealed trauma, substance abuse, and mental health concerns, that make some individuals, including veterans, susceptible to radicalization and recruitment by DVE groups; and
- Peer support, including support from other veterans, military families, and Veterans Services Organizations, is vital to countering the threat of domestic violent extremism within the veteran population.

Based on these findings, Majority Staff of the Committee makes the following policy recommendations:

- **The federal government, academic institutions, and civil society groups should fund, conduct, and collaborate on sustained data collection and scientific study to better understand how, why, and how often domestic violent extremism occurs within the veteran community and the extent to which certain protective factors are effective in preventing and counteracting veteran radicalization.** The Committee has advanced legislation to codify and support VA's research authorities and to enable public-private scientific partnerships with a goal of increasing veteran well-being. Two of the organizations represented at the March 31, 2022, hearing (We the Veterans and Parents for Peace) recently received grant funding from the Department of Homeland Security to develop and evaluate primary prevention and intervention strategies. Efforts like these could be built upon, and more specifically focused on, combatting the small but growing threat of domestic violent extremism within the veteran community.

- **The Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs, in collaboration with Military and Veterans Service Organizations, should infuse early prevention and intervention programs, as well as civics education, into the training that active duty servicemembers and veterans receive before, during, and after their separation from the military.** This would be in line with a major focus of the Committee’s oversight work in ensuring that the transition from active duty to veteran status includes a broad range of education and resource-sharing aimed at promoting healthy engagement in civilian life.
- **VA should equip its clinical and benefits staff, along with community providers paid by VA to work with veterans, with tools to identify and assist veterans who are at risk of radicalization and recruitment by DVE groups.** The Committee has placed a priority on, and introduced legislation to, mandate better training of VA and community providers in assessing and intervening in the face of other adverse outcomes, such as suicide and homelessness. Similarly, VA should address the risks of veterans’ engagement in violent extremism.
- **Congress and VA should continue to prioritize funding for VA initiatives that address veterans’ basic needs (i.e., employment, education, housing, hunger, and healthcare),** which are both fundamental needs and related to veterans’ risk of becoming involved with violent extremism. The Committee, like VA, takes a “whole health” public health approach to veteran well-being and has enacted and advanced legislation to address gaps related to veteran hunger, homelessness, healthcare access, and educational and employment opportunities.
- **The Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs should collaborate with veterans, military and veteran families, and Military and Veterans Service Organizations who are actively engaged in research-informed programs aimed at preventing and responding to violent extremism within the veteran community.** The Committee has long promoted VA partnerships with nonprofit organizations in areas such as mental health, employment, and healthcare research and these partnerships can be further developed to address the small but growing threat of domestic violent extremism within the veteran community.

While the pathways to and away from violent extremism are complex and multi-dimensional, expert witnesses at the Committee’s March 31, 2022, hearing described actionable steps that can be taken to increase resilience within the veteran community and protect those who are at risk of or have already been radicalized or recruited by DVE groups. Using a strengths-based approach that builds on the unique talents of veterans – virtues like honor, courage, leadership, and volunteerism – government actors, civil society groups, military families, and the veteran community itself can work together to mitigate the threat posed by domestic violent extremism.