

**Statement of the Honorable Glenn ‘GT’ Thompson, Representative,
Pennsylvania’s Fifth Congressional District**

Before the House Armed Services Committee

**Hearing on, “*National Defense Priorities from Members for the FY
2014 National Defense Authorization Act*”**

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Chairman McKeon, Ranking Member Smith, Members of the Armed Service Committee, thank you for allowing me to testify before you today.

This Committee has done an excellent job supporting the brave men and women who serve our country, which is a passion I share with each of you.

Two years ago, I worked very closely with the Committee to include the Servicemembers Telemedicine and E-Health Portability Act, or STEP Act, in the Fiscal Year 2012 National Defense Authorization Act, which was signed into law in December of 2012.

The STEP Act was a positive step forward in modernizing how the Department of Defense delivers health care. Specifically, it made widespread telemedicine possible and accessible by expanding the state licensure exemption to all DOD health care professionals, regardless of where they, or the patient, are located.

Many Committee Members have worked closely on the issue of mental health and suicide prevention, and know just how important it is for our service members to get treatment – without delay. Of equal importance, is ensuring that our service members can access care without the stigma that is often associated with seeking mental health treatment. The STEP Act is assisting with achieving these very goals.

Last year after passage of the STEP Act, the Army was able to perform nearly 36,000 teleconsultations, which included over 31,200 tele-behavioral health clinical encounters. This is an incredible achievement, and great start.

Since passage, I have worked closely with the Department of Defense to monitor its implementation.

In large part, the Services have embraced these changes. In a new memo to the service chiefs this year, the DOD presented the first part of STEP Act implementation with a broad waiver to expand telemedicine. This waiver was a tremendous step forward.

However, there remain two areas which the DOD needs to address:

- First, the waiver does not allow service members to use telemedicine from their homes, only “fixed facilities.”
- Second, TRICARE providers were not included as a part of this waiver for licensure portability.

However, the STEP Act already clearly addressed both of these waiver issues. This is my concern. The DOD has not fully implemented the spirit or letter of the law.

We need to make health services and care as convenient and accessible as possible, especially when it comes to mental health. There is no better way to remove the stigma of seeking mental health from a bricks and mortar facility, in plain sight of colleagues, than to allow our service members to access care in the comfort and privacy of their own homes.

As for TRICARE, the exclusion of these providers equates to the categorical exclusion of thousands of mental health care workers from being able to provide assistance, at a time when there is a recognized lack of qualified providers.

Yesterday I had the opportunity to speak with Dr. Jonathan Woodson, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs, and relayed some of my concerns to him. Dr. Woodson has done a great job with many of the licensing details of the STEP Act and has promised to reexamine the waiver issue, in order to address some of these concerns.

We face serious challenges when it comes to meeting the health care needs of our returning services members. We also face escalating costs in health care, during a time of budgetary constraints. The STEP Act law is allowing us to effectively navigate both of these challenges – providing quality and expanded care while simultaneously reducing costs.

As I mentioned earlier, over 31,000 tele-behavioral health clinical encounters took place last year. This represents a nearly

800% growth since 2009, and is still only between clinical locations. These numbers will continue to increase and would undoubtedly have a tremendous impact if allowed to further expand.

With this in mind, I respectfully request the Committee's assistance in working with the Pentagon to fully implement this law. If full implementation is not or cannot be achieved under the existing authorization, further legislative clarification or additional statutory guidance may be needed.

Again, I would like to thank the Committee and distinguished members for the opportunity to provide testimony today. I look forward to working together to achieve these goals.