I’d like to thank the committee for the opportunity to speak today. Veteran suicide is a difficult topic. Please bear with me as I attempt to present my idea and share some of the experiences I’ve had since my son’s death in 2013.

I’m not a writer, speaker or politician. I am not looking for sympathy. I have heard comments from people to that effect in the past. This is not about me. This is about them. This is about the men and women who served our Country and lost their struggle. This is about respect.

 I used to look at Memorial Day as a three day weekend. It was a chance to relax with friends and family, attend picnics or go to parties. I have a deeper understanding today. Every day is Memorial Day for countless families like mine.

One of the things I feel makes America great is the fact that we honor those who fought for our freedom. We name bridges, buildings, roads and stretches of highway to honor and remember those who died in war. We hold parades where speeches are made to remind us all that freedom isn’t free.

We honor and respect the families of the fallen as well. They are referred to as Gold Star families. America honors them all year long. Their loss has become our loss. Galas, tributes and even dinners at the White House are small compensation for what they have lost. I am forever in their debt.

I applaud these efforts as I feel these simple acts of remembrance make us who we are. It helps define us as good people, full of character and compassion having honorable intentions for generations to share. We attend ceremonies to honor the fallen, shaking hands, showing face, pretending to understand what their sacrifice means. But we don’t understand.

How many of you know what the number 22 signifies in today’s America? How many of you know that approximately 22 veterans complete the act of suicide every day? That’s approximately 660 per month. That’s more than 8,000 per year! I find these numbers unacceptable. We are a better people.

Did you know that more than 140k veterans have ended their lives since 9/11? We hear next to nothing about this from our leaders in DC. The media pays more attention to the passing of a grumpy cat! We have lost more veterans to suicide since 9/11 than all wars combined since WWII. Korea + Vietnam + Iraq and Afghanistan and every other police action where our troops put their lives at risk! Our leaders have sent troops into harm’s way more than 140 times since WWII. Special Forces serve around the world. We are not a peaceful people.

Did you know that there isn’t one state in America that has dedicated a road, bridge, building or stretch of highway to recognize the struggle these veterans have lost? All gave some. Some gave all. Some gave up. A lot of the families I’ve met feel their loved ones died of indifference.

How many of you remember the Fort Hood shooting? How many of you know that one of the victims was from Ohio? My son was SSG Joshua Berry. He kept Nidal Hasan from gaining access to one of the buildings in the compound yet you won’t find him listed among the killed or injured. He didn’t exist. The Army forgot about him.

I am a No Star father. I am not entitled to the same courtesies extended to the families of those who died in combat. I don’t qualify for Gold Star license plates. I am not invited to dinners or galas. My son isn’t included in the memorial display near Fort Hood. I don’t understand. Josh died of indifference.

Since my son’s death I’ve reached out to all of our elected officials in DC including two Presidents, five Secretaries of Defense, all members of Congress and the appropriate committees. I hear crickets. I’ve reached out to two governors here in Ohio as well as members of the in the Ohio House and Senate. I hear crickets……until recently. Thanks to Jessica Miranda and Paul Zeltwanger for supporting this effort!

I believe a loss is a loss. I know the empty chair at my table is just as empty as the one in a Gold Star home, yet families like mine are little consideration.

Since my son’s death I’ve met hundreds of families throughout America just like mine. In 2017 I started Flags for Forgotten Soldiers is a grass roots effort attempting to raise public awareness to the veteran suicide crisis. We have placed flag displays in more than 30 states. It’s about honoring them and respecting their families. Each flag represents a veteran who lost their life in the past 30 days. I have witnessed the 88 year old widow of a WWII veteran who went out for a pack of smokes and never returned placing flags with a five year old who lost her uncle to suicide upon being released from the VA after telling them he was at risk! I have witnessed veterans commit to seeking care in an effort not to become a flag. The most heard comment at every display has been, I had no idea! I had no idea so many veterans were taking their lives.

How many of you remember the slogan, “Ohio, The Heart Of It All” I believe Ohio has the opportunity to be just that for families like mine. You have the opportunity to make a real difference. Please give families like mine some relief by recognizing their loss.

Dedicating the 22 mile marker on I 71 is the right thing to do. The Veteran Suicide Memorial Mile should be displayed on every Interstate across America. Please be the first state to do so. Too many, Too soon!

God Bless all veterans.

I miss my son.