



THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON

November 15, 2023

The Honorable Jerry Moran
Ranking Member
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20515

Senator Moran

Thank you for your November 14, 2023 letter to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) regarding the Veterans Crisis Line (VCL). Our top priority with the VCL is to make sure that Veterans get the support they need, whenever and wherever they need it – and we will never settle for anything less. VA takes any allegations of insufficient care or service very seriously and will investigate thoroughly. We look forward to receiving the forthcoming report from the Government Accountability Office and considering any recommendations.

We also want to reaffirm our appreciation and support for whistleblowers at VA, who raise important issues and help us better serve our nation's heroes. It takes courage to raise concerns, and we at VA are dedicated to building a culture where every employee feels empowered and unafraid to do so. We are committed to protecting the identity of whistleblowers, and we encourage any whistleblowers to reach out to VA's Office of Whistleblower Protection (OAWP) by visiting www.VA.gov/accountability or by calling 855-429-6669.

While we await GAO's report, we wanted to provide you with some additional context around the "Callers with Complex Needs" (CWCN) Program. Callers with complex needs are known callers who display inappropriately abusive behavior (e.g., cursing at responders or being racist toward responders); sexual behavior; or high-frequency calling for a purpose other than crisis support (e.g., calling VCL hundreds of times per day). Oftentimes, these callers are not Veterans – or those calling on behalf of Veterans – and can take up resources that would normally be used to serve Veterans in immediate crisis.

VA created the CWCN Program in the Spring of 2018 to address the specific needs of these callers. Through the program, these callers are directed to a team of more than 100 specially trained responders who receive an additional 32 hours of training on behavior-shaping, boundary-setting, and coaching. The CWCN Program is evidenced-based, mirrored by other call centers, and supported by several crisis call center accreditation agencies – including the American Association of Suicidology (AAS), Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF), and the International Customer Management Institute (ICMI). We monitor staffing for the CWCN

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Program team 24/7 to ensure that we are meeting the needs of CWCN callers. We currently have 127 VCL responders who are fully trained for CWCN. In the rare situation that we come close to capacity for CWCN callers during any shift, we will add staff to that shift, using overtime and other tools. We have grown the team by 24% over the past 3 years, and – if needed – we will continue to grow the team in the coming years.

As a part of a treatment plan for CWCN callers, the crisis line sometimes uses “selectively delayed responses.” This is a best practice – used across the 988 network – to help these callers modify their behavior by pausing their engagement with a responder. While engaged in a delay, the caller hears a caring message about why they are waiting for a response, how to shape their behavior to be removed from a hold, and what to do if in crisis. Crucially, there is always an option for these callers to connect to support immediately if they are experiencing an urgent crisis, and these callers are neither placed on indefinite holds nor involuntarily disconnected. Additionally, even if there is an inadvertent disconnection, there is no break in record retention – because these callers have extensive records with the VCL team.

Evidence demonstrates that the establishment of the CWCN Program has both helped CWCN callers and improved the VCL for all other callers. Since the launch of this program in 2018, the average number of calls per CWCN caller decreased by 48%, from an average of 210 calls per active CWCN caller in fiscal year 2017 to an average of 110 calls per active CWCN caller by fiscal year 2022. *(For context, the average number of calls per non-CWCN caller in fiscal year 2022 was two.)* This decrease in calls per CWCN caller represents a step forward for these CWCN callers, a decrease in abuse for VCL responders, and an increase in VCL resources for non-CWCN callers who are in immediate crisis.

While implementing the CWCN Program, VA has also taken steps to expand and improve the VCL as a whole. VA has aggressively hired VCL workers, more than doubling the total number of full-time VCL employees from 886 in April 2021 to 1,833 in November 2023. Thanks in part to this increase in staffing, 98% of all incoming calls are now answered (with a less than 2% abandonment rate), 96% of all calls are answered within 20 seconds, and the average speed of answer is less than 10 seconds. This performance has led to a 92.9% satisfaction rate among Veterans and 93.7% satisfaction rate among non-Veterans.

In July 2022, we also made it easier for Veterans to access caring, qualified responders by designating “Dial 988 then Press 1” as the new, shortened VCL number. Since then, the crisis line has fielded more than 1.3 million contacts. This includes more than 1,098,000 calls (an increase of 12.9% from the pre-988 period) and a year-over-year increase in text messages (40.6%) and online chats received (10.5%). This

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increase in contacts is evidence that the VCL is working – Veterans in crisis are getting the help they need at the moment they need it.

There is also an abundance of evidence that the VCL is helping prevent suicide among callers. Recent studies show that Veteran callers to the crisis line were over 5 times more likely to have less distress at the end of a call than at the beginning, almost 5 times more likely to have less suicidal ideation at the end of a call than at the beginning, and 11 times more likely to have less suicidal urgency at end of a call than at the beginning. Furthermore, among Veterans who had suicidal thoughts who called VCL, 82.6% reported that using the VCL played a role in stopping them from acting on those thoughts.

We are deeply grateful to the VCL team, including the CWCN staff, who provide support to our nation's heroes in the times when they need it most. These public servants do lifesaving work every day, and we thank them for all they do for Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors.

We are grateful to you, the whistleblowers, the GAO, and all of our oversight partners – all of whom are critical to improving the care and benefits we deliver to Veterans. Moving forward, we would be happy to provide you with an in-person briefing on the CWCN Program and the VCL – or provide you with a full briefing on these topics in our regularly-scheduled, monthly mental health briefings. We will also continue to make improvements, be transparent, and hold ourselves accountable to providing Veterans with the world-class, life-saving care and services that they so rightly deserve.

Thank you for your continued support of our mission.

Sincerely,



Denis McDonough

cc: Michael Missal, Inspector General, Department