

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 13, 2017

The Honorable David J. Shulkin
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary Shulkin:

We write to express our concern over continued delays in implementing much needed reforms to the Veterans Crisis Line (VCL). With data from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) indicating there are 20 veteran suicides a day, any delay is unacceptable and must be addressed. We ask that you immediately implement a directive specific to the functioning of the VCL and implement related improvements to governance and oversight of VCL operations.

For over a year now, the VA Office of the Inspector General (VAOIG) has cited the absence of a VCL directive as a factor in gaps in quality assurance at the VCL. VA concurred with that recommendation, with a targeted completion date of June 2016, and yet has still not provided a directive expressly for the VCL. Over the past year, VA has taken important steps to improve the functioning of the VCL, including opening a second call center. However, the most recent statement by the VAOIG at a House Committee on Veterans' Affairs hearing on April 4, 2017, indicates that there remain outstanding issues that are fundamental to the functioning of the VCL, such as the determination of whether an issue is handled by clinical or administrative staff. Without clear guidance on how the VCL should run, it is impossible to expect that staff who are faced with some of the most challenging calls in their field would be able to run the VCL at its highest level. We ask for your immediate attention to this matter.


Additionally, we understand that the VCL is presently managed by an acting director. We call on you to ensure that both VCL call centers have permanent leadership on-site as soon as possible, particularly considering the potential increase in demand for VCL services by veterans with other than honorable discharges following your recent statements. Having a strong directive in place is also vital for improving the VCL as Congress has required. As you are aware, last year, P.L. 114-247, the No Veterans Crisis Line Call Should Go Unanswered Act, was passed to require the Secretary of VA to develop a quality assurance document to ensure VA is meeting measurable quality performance goals. That plan is due to Congress next month. We fully expect the timely delivery of that report, but in order for the VCL to be able to make quality improvements, a directive must be in place to ensure proper procedures are being followed to meet quality goals.

Please immediately inform us of the date that we can expect that the directive will be completed. We look forward to continuing to work with you to end veteran suicide.

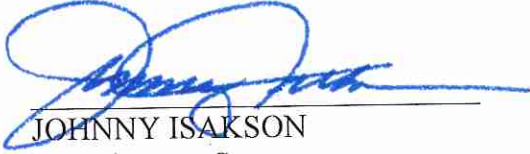
Sincerely,



RICHARD BLUMENTHAL
United States Senate



JON TESTER
United States Senate



JOHNNY ISAKSON
United States Senate



AMY KLOBUCHAR
United States Senate