

I am a service-connected Veteran who has worked on the Veterans and Military Crisis Line (VCL) since 2018. During my tenure, I have encountered numerous challenges involving Callers With Complex Needs (CWCN). However, an incident I experienced recently raised significant concerns regarding responder safety, communication, operational procedures, and the manner in which frontline responders are expected to manage repeated abusive calls.

I am submitting this statement to document my experience and to raise concerns regarding changes in CWCN procedures that, based on the information provided to me by supervisory staff, have not been adequately communicated to frontline responders.

Incident on My Tour

My tour began at 5:00 a.m. At approximately 5:03 a.m., I received a call from a known CWCN caller. According to the caller's established protocol, the responder is expected to complete a risk assessment and risk mitigation regarding the Veteran's current presenting risk factors. The protocol further states that if the Veteran becomes abusive during the call, the responder should attempt to redirect the behavior once. If the abusive behavior continues, the responder is instructed to inform the Veteran that the call will need to be ended.

I subsequently received additional calls from the same CWCN caller at approximately:

- 5:15 a.m.
- 5:34 a.m.
- 5:51 a.m.
- 6:28 a.m.

During these repeated contacts, I experienced escalating levels of abusive behavior. At that point, I was not only concerned about the conduct directed toward me as a frontline responder, but also about how I could have received the same CWCN caller repeatedly when there were more than 100 other responders available on the line.

Because of the frequency and nature of the calls, I contacted a supervisor and explained what had occurred. I was asked whether I was assigned to the CWCN Cadre. I explained that I was not and that I was working in the regular queue. The supervisor stated that it was "odd" that the caller had repeatedly routed to me and instructed me to complete a report. I was also told, in substance, that beyond documenting the incident, I would have to "field the calls that you get."

I subsequently discussed the incident with my Team Supervisor. During that discussion, I was informed that there had been a change in CWCN leadership and that changes had been made to the manner in which certain CWCN callers were routed through the system.

Information Provided Regarding Changes to CWCN Procedures

According to the information provided to me by supervisory staff, CWCN callers who repeatedly "tax" or heavily utilize the crisis line are no longer being placed in a queueing process that

previously required the caller to wait approximately 10 minutes before being connected with a responder.

I was further informed that these changes were related, in part, to concerns involving organizational liability and the possibility that a caller could repeatedly contact the Crisis Line, subsequently experience an adverse event, and then it could be determined that the individual had previously sought assistance from the Crisis Line without sufficient intervention or support.

I was also informed that CWCN callers with an "Redacted name" designation are no longer included in the CWCN Cadre. I was not previously aware of these procedural changes, nor was this information communicated to me as a frontline responder before I began handling the calls that morning.

Concerns Regarding Frontline Responder Safety and Communication

My primary concern is not that the Crisis Line should decline to assist Veterans with complex or recurrent needs. I fully support ensuring that Veterans in crisis have access to care and that appropriate risk assessments and interventions are completed.

My concern is that frontline responders are being required to operate under procedures that may have changed without timely, comprehensive communication or training.

Frontline responders are expected to follow established protocols while simultaneously managing repeated and, at times, abusive contacts. When operational procedures governing CWCN callers change, responders need to be informed of those changes, provided with appropriate guidance, and given a clear understanding of how those changes affect established protocols.

Failing to communicate such changes creates several concerns:

1. **Responder safety and well-being:** Frontline responders may be repeatedly exposed to abusive or potentially traumatic interactions without knowing that the routing or management procedures have changed.
2. **Consistency in crisis response:** Responders may continue following procedures that they reasonably believe remain in effect while the operational system is functioning under different expectations.
3. **Training and accountability:** Responders can be held accountable for following procedures, yet may not have been adequately informed when those procedures or related operational practices change.
4. **Workforce impact:** Repeated exposure to abusive interactions can add to the emotional and psychological burden already associated with crisis-line work.
5. **Patient and responder protection:** A system designed to ensure that Veterans receive appropriate support should also establish reasonable safeguards for the employees responsible for providing that support.

Request for Congressional Oversight

I respectfully ask the Committee to examine the policies and operational changes governing CWCN callers, particularly:

- How changes to CWCN routing and queueing procedures are communicated to frontline responders.
- Whether frontline responders receive timely training when procedures, leadership structures, or caller classifications change.
- What safeguards exist to protect responders from repeated abusive contacts.
- How the Crisis Line balances its responsibility to provide uninterrupted assistance to Veterans with its responsibility to protect its workforce.
- How CWCN callers are currently classified, routed, monitored, and managed.
- The significance of the “Redacted name” designation and the basis for removing individuals with that designation from the CWCN Cadre.
- Whether current practices are consistent with written VCL policies, responder protocols, and applicable employee safety requirements.

I have dedicated years of service to the Veterans and Military Crisis Line and remain committed to supporting Veterans who reach out during moments of crisis. At the same time, supporting Veterans should not require frontline responders to absorb repeated abusive behavior without adequate protection, communication, training, or organizational support.

The incident described above left me mentally distressed and frustrated because I was attempting to follow the procedures provided to me while simultaneously navigating operational practices that, according to supervisory information, had changed without my knowledge.

Frontline responders should not have to discover significant procedural changes in the middle of a crisis interaction. Clear communication, appropriate training, consistent procedures, and meaningful protections for responders are essential to maintaining a safe and effective Crisis Line for both Veterans and the employees who serve them.

Respectfully submitted,

Service-Connected Veteran
Veterans and Military Crisis Line Responder
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Since 2018