

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 20, 2018

The Honorable Robert Wilkie
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Mr. Secretary,

We are concerned that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is failing to use every resource at its disposal to prevent the staggering number of suicides among veterans. Veterans across this nation deserve better.

This week, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) published a report that found that leadership vacancies contributed to the decline of VA's paid suicide prevention media outreach activities. As suicide prevention is VA's highest clinical priority and the third highest priority in its 2018-2024 Strategic Plan, it is appalling that VA is not conducting oversight of its own outreach efforts.

GAO found that of the \$6.2 million obligated in Fiscal Year (FY) 2018 for suicide prevention paid media efforts, as of September, VHA had spent just \$57,000. Dysfunction at VA cannot be the excuse for the lack of a plan to execute suicide prevention outreach. Regardless of changes in leadership and organizational realignment, efforts to prevent suicide must remain at the forefront of the Department's care of veterans. To allow critical outreach to lapse because of delays caused by staffing-related issues is a dereliction of VA's responsibility to care for veterans – especially those at-risk of suicide.

Further, GAO found that VA lacks targets to assist in evaluating the effectiveness of suicide prevention efforts. It appears that while VA outwardly advances suicide prevention as its highest goal, its internal actions are lacking. An example of this is the Department's failure to set goals for the majority of the metrics it uses to evaluate the effectiveness of its suicide prevention media outreach campaign. Without such information, VA does not know whether its campaign is working. For example, GAO indicated that during VA's 2016 Suicide Prevention Month there was an eight percent uptick in the number of visits to the Veterans' Crisis Hotline, however, the report failed to evaluate if the eight percent met expectations. Given the "focus" on suicide prevention efforts in recent years, it is astonishing that VA has not established basic targets to evaluate if its campaigns are effective. We request that rather than rely strictly on metrics VA develops internally, that you consult with experts with proven track records of successful public and mental health outreach campaigns with a particular emphasis on how those individuals measure success.

Recommendations in the report included an established approach for VA to oversee its suicide prevention media outreach campaign that incorporates a clear delineation of roles and responsibilities and establishes goals for its metrics to improve evaluation efforts. While we understand you have agreed with these reasonable attempts to get suicide prevention efforts on track, we further request that VA provide a full accounting of the \$17.7 million VA budgeted for its suicide prevention and mental health media outreach for FY 2018 so that Congress can be assured that all funding for this effort is being utilized appropriately.

Every veteran suicide is a tragic outcome and outreach is key to making progress against this American public health crisis. We look forward to your response and commitment to keeping suicide prevention as VA's highest clinical priority.

Sincerely,



Jon Tester



Jack Reed



Margaret Wood Hassan



Bernard Sanders



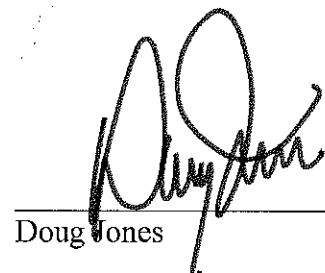
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