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Former Veterans Crisis Line Responder  
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Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and members of the Veterans Affairs Committee, thank you for the opportunity to give a voice to federal employees. I am Marcia Blane, a Licensed Professional Counselor, a Certified Professional Counselor Supervisor, and a Certified Hypnotherapist. I am the proud retired employee of the Federal Government where I worked for 28.5 years spending 19 years at the Department of Treasury – Internal Revenue Service and the last 9.5 years at the Veterans Crisis Line via the Veteran Administration.

In 2016, I transitioned from the IRS to the VA to pursue my dream and purpose of offering support to Veterans. As the daughter and mother of Marine Combat Veterans watching and living through the impact of post-traumatic stress after combat for my father and son, I found it imperative to give back to a community that has given so much of themselves.

At the IRS, I had the pleasure of rising through the ranks from a clerk to a supervisor who often acted in the role of department manager, facilitator, trainer, and author of many job manuals, and trainer of new leaders. Those years of experience followed me to the VA and upon arrival, I noticed the Department lacked certain levels of structure including Standard Operating Procedures (SOP), guidelines based on the Union Contract, and a leadership staff elevated not based on experience, all of which created unnecessary risk and uncertainties.

When the Atlanta site opened in 2016, future employees were required to have a master's degree in an area of Mental Health. Whether it was a Social Worker, Licensed Professional Counselor, Marriage and Family Therapist, and some Applied Behavior Analysis, the level of education mattered. Prior to Atlanta, you weren't required to have a master's degree to be employed by the Veteran's Crisis Line. In fact, once coming on board our degrees were frowned upon by the staff working in Canandaigua, NY.

The newly hired Responders faced racially, misogynist, abusive, and sexually inappropriate interactions with the callers while facing racially charged interactions with the employees in TEAMS chats. Our complaints about the abuse from our peers led to the separation of chats, but there was no direct consequence against those who initiated the negative interactions. During training, we were repeatedly told "your degrees don't matter." In fact, that had been the perspective given throughout the VA. However, for the work that we do to save lives, our degrees certainly mattered. The professionalism we brought to the staff was relevant because we were trained to deal with crises differently, so there were less incidents of employees telling

Veterans to “go f yourself” or “go kill yourself.” Yes, that actually happened, and we were left appalled when that employee continued to enjoy employment until he retired.

Since 2016, I along with a couple of other Responders worked tirelessly to meet with the leadership staff with the hope of establishing protocols regarding abusive callers. In 2017, during a team meeting attended by the then acting Director, I inquired about the impact of the racially charged calls and the plan to handle these callers and the ability to protect the employees. Her response to the inquiry was, “you all need to find out why it’s so impacting when someone calls you the n word.” Out of frustration, I retorted then we should equally understand that it’s ok for callers to be similarly derogatory to non-Black responders. Without a commitment to make changes, they stormed out of the room, shouting to anyone within ear shot: “Marcia thinks I’m a racist.” I will acknowledge that she tried to rectify her actions and asked me to put a team together and offer suggestions to help reduce the impact of the racially and sexually charged interactions internally and externally.

After working with a team, creating PowerPoints, assessments, and educational information, the process was shut down by those in charge in Canandaigua, NY, the main VCL office, and I was told, “The leaders are apprehensive to be taught DEI by a Responder.” While they coined it DEI, it was actually an effort to educate the masses regarding abusive callers and the impact it has on workers. Unfortunately, this was the continued stance of the leadership at the VCL. Unless you were in Canandaigua, any way that you could contribute to making it a better workplace was shunned.

Even after new leadership was later installed to oversee the operations of the Veterans Crisis Line, we saw a regime disconnected to the actions and experiences of front-line employees. Veterans continue to fall through the gaps as they are connected to burned out Suicide Prevention Coordinators who often end calls if it was known the Veteran was not actively suicidal. The system was and has been broken. You have a staff of highly trained individuals who are often told, “This is not a clinical position so don’t use that skillset.” As a therapist, I understand human behavior and addressing it is contrary treating the VCL like a production line. I utilized my skills to help de-escalate Veterans who were experiencing crises from suicidal ideation and contemplation, to marital problems, to unprocessed trauma. The Veterans Crisis Line is filled with caring professionals who are frequently encouraged to dim their lights and just answer the call.

During the proverbial dimming of the light, we are faced with a barrage of callers that have been identified as Callers with Complexed Needs (CWCN). These callers are aggressive, abusive, disrespectful, and burden the VCL lines. They will intentionally call 30 to 40 times a day in a hope to interrupt the functioning of the line and then go to social media and say things such as “see they don’t answer the call.” We encountered situations where on one call we have just

talked a person into unloading the firearm they were planning to use to complete their life to the next call with an abuser who is calling us every racial epithet they know and joking about you being sexually assaulted.?

In the beginning, the recourse was to redirect the callers three times before disconnecting. Can you imagine what those words do to the nervous system of someone who can't fight back? They have changed the process to redirecting once and terminating the call. Currently, the CWCN-trained team is understaffed, and the calls are being handled more and more by main line Responders, which again taxes the broader system. Several years ago, there was an OIG complaint from those callers that created the CWCN cadre, however the abuse they projected on the employees and the lines overall was not taken into consideration. In the past decade, there have been two individuals charged with abusing federal employees and the line, however there are many more that must face the consequences of the abuse. If these same callers were presenting at a local VAMC they would have been escorted from the premises, a flag placed on their account, and unable to go to the VA without police escort.

The VCL does not have a reprieve from the abuse. If a Responder responds in a manner that Quality Assurance deems inappropriate, you are threatened to be taken off the phone. For example, an abusive Veteran caller consistently called me "an old Black b\*\*\*\*\*" but continued to mention suicidal ideation. In that instance, the call can't be redirected, and we must pursue a safety plan, assessing for means, and the probability of him acting on the threat of self-harm. In this instance, I responded "young man I'm a part of Generation X and your abuse doesn't cause harm, but I do need to know what you need and the probability of harming yourself." His inability to rattle me caused him to become more aggressive and ending the calling saying, "I'm not going to do anything to myself." The Quality agent saw it as unprofessional and deemed it necessary to be removed from the phones. In those instances, I was reminded that others outside of the VCL had been hired to become Quality Monitors and often failed to have the experience of being a Crisis Responder.

Currently, the CWCN cadre is experiencing increased volumes via digital services resulting in the system crashing frequently. There appears to be a lack of adequate staffing as well as operable bandwidth to handle the volume. Creating a process to restrict incoming calls or text will assist with servicing customers of the VCL.

On May 8, 2025, I submitted my final email to the VCL as it was my last working day before retirement, and I shared with leadership that it is important that they gain experience by observing live calls since most of leadership has not been a Responder. Rules on call handling are being made by people who have not had the experience of talking down a caller or hearing the completion of life and doing all that you can to prevent it. There are not adequate routes of recovery when a Responder experience misses or near misses because of the underlying myth

that “Responders aren’t working since we are working from home” by individuals who have no direct experience with what we do. The employees working from home statistically have less call outs, handle more calls, and provide effective service. One of things that is prevalent is leaders are trying to manage and supervise when their skills lack ability, insight, and often experience. An example of the lack of insight was the recent termination of vital employees, the Social Science Assistants (SSA), who are our ears and fingers when we are in the throes of a crisis call. They become the investigators to find the locations of callers who won’t reveal their locations. They are the voice behind the calls to local police departments when rescues are activated. They are the follow up to ensure a Veteran or civilian has arrived at a facility. Terminating those employees created a delay in service, reducing employee morale, and making all of us vulnerable to misses.

In closing, the VCL could be a much better place to work if VA utilized the skills and experiences of their employees to create a healthy environment for the employees and those that we serve. There is more to the people working from home for the VCL than what I have shared here. They are the professionals that keep individuals who are ready to end their life to change direction based on hope and the love for what they do. And VA has to do better for them so they can continue to provide the best possible support for veterans in crisis.

Thank you for your time and I look forward to your questions.

Marcia Blane