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United States Senate

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February 24, 2016

The Honorable Robert McDonald
Secretary
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary McDonald:

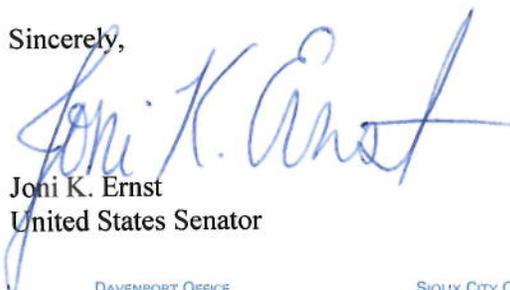
I am appalled by the poor management at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and a recent Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General (OIG) report which found that at least 23 veterans who contacted VA's Veterans Crisis Line (VCL) were transferred to a voicemail system and their calls never returned. This is a crisis for far too many of our bravest men and women and cannot be ignored.

There is simply no excuse for VA to allow calls from veterans reaching out to the Department for lifesaving assistance to go unanswered. I remain deeply disturbed that the Department continues to allow itself to fail our veterans when they are most at need—particularly those veterans who are facing imminent crises such as a potential suicide. Often, when our veterans reach out to VA for help—whether it be through VCL or in attempting to schedule an appointment to see a mental health professional—it can be at a time when they have reached the breaking point.

As you know, it is widely reported that every day our country loses to suicide 22 men and women who once wore our nation's uniform. The VA must be part of the solution to reduce that number of veteran suicides, and not part of the problem where it contributes to unnecessary delays for veterans to receive the potentially lifesaving care they need and deserve.

As a Member of the U.S. Senate, and as a veteran, it is my duty to ensure our nation lives up to the promises it has made to our veterans. I urge you to take swift action to hold those VA employees accountable who were directly responsible for this inexcusable lapse in care, as well as the VA's Director of the Office of Mental Health Operations who oversees VCL. I also urge you to immediately implement the recommendations provided by VA OIG to ensure veterans who reach out for help through VCL are receiving the care they deserve as well as previous VA OIG recommendations to improve overall mental health care for our veterans.

Sincerely,



Joni K. Ernst
United States Senator

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