



DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
Under Secretary for Health
Washington DC 20420

NOV 21 2016

The Honorable Joni K. Ernst
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Ernst:

Thank you for your July 15, 2016, letter requesting concrete steps the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) will take to prevent suicide tragedies such as Mr. Brandon Ketchum's death. We are deeply concerned about what occurred with Mr. Ketchum, and with the 20 Veterans who take their own life each day.

VA was saddened to learn that a Veteran who was receiving care from us has died by suicide. This is a tragedy for everyone involved, because even one Veteran suicide is one too many. The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act Privacy Rule prohibits VA from speaking about the specifics of Mr. Ketchum's care. Please note that the Office of Inspector General conducted a preliminary fact finding site visit at the Iowa City VA Health Care System (HCS) on August 4 and 5, 2016. In addition, a protected peer review has been initiated for the Iowa City HCS to be conducted by a separate VA medical center, as well as a non-VA facility. All results from these investigations are pending at this time.

VA's local policies and procedures for admitting Veterans to inpatient mental health care at the Iowa City HCS are consistent with national policies (See the enclosed Fact Sheet). Additionally, VHA Handbook 1160.01, *Uniform Mental Health Services in VA Medical Centers and Clinics* provides VA policy concerning mental health admissions to inpatient services. Consistent with this policy when acute mental health care is determined to be needed, immediate admission is optimal. When this is not possible, there must be no delay in taking action to initiate treatment and ensure the safety of the Veteran. If appropriate treatment facilities are not available at the site where the patient is receiving the evaluation, sites must have a plan in place to ensure Veterans have access to the needed level of care. Mental health admissions must be addressed with appropriate urgency just as medical or surgical admissions are addressed. Assessment and care must be provided in a timely manner.

Veterans tend to be at a higher risk for suicide than the general U.S. population. This is particularly true for Veterans with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), pain, sleep disorders, depression, and substance use disorder. For these reasons VA is working every day to improve mental health services, screenings, and outreach to Veterans who may be in crisis. One way in which VA addresses these issues is by equipping each VA medical center with a Suicide Prevention Coordinator or team to offer Veterans the services they need.

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When appropriate, Veteran Crisis Lines can refer calls to Suicide Prevention Coordinators, who follow up with Veterans and coordinate care for issues ranging from PTSD and depression to readjustment challenges and sleeping problems. The mental health service at the Iowa City HCS provides consultation, evaluation, and treatment for a variety of issues that can impact emotional well-being. (See Enclosed Fact Sheet) In addition, the facility conducts research and training to ensure state-of-the-art treatment and emergency mental health services are available for Veterans at the Iowa City HCS 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

We are looking for additional ways to reduce the number of Veteran suicides and have recently implemented the Recovery Engagement And Coordination for Health – Veterans Enhanced Treatment (REACH VET) program, which is a program to help identify at-risk Veterans who may benefit from enhanced care. The program is meant to proactively address complex care needs, including mental health concerns.

REACH VET helps ensure that our Nation's most vulnerable Veterans, who may be at risk for suicide, are receiving the right care. We believe proactively addressing Veterans' health care needs can lead to better recovery outcomes, lessen the likelihood of challenges becoming crises, and reduce the stress that Veterans and their loved ones face in the wake of a tragic situation. Right now, VA's health care providers and mental health professionals are trained to help Veterans identify and solve problems, but sometimes additional support is beneficial before problems become apparent. REACH VET is meant to be that extra support system. For your convenience, I am enclosing an overview of the new program. REACH VET training is underway and is being introduced at all VA medical centers across the country.

Should you have further questions, please have a member of your staff contact Ms. Nikki Barnes, Congressional Relations Officer, at (202) 461-7437 or by email at Nikki.Barnes@va.gov.

Thank you for your continued support of our mission.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "David J. Shulkin, M.D." The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

David J. Shulkin, M.D.

Enclosures

**Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)
Veterans Health Administration (VHA)
Iowa City VA Health Care System (HCS)**

Fact Sheet

**Response to Senator Joni Ernst Regarding VA's Local Policies and Procedures
for Admitting Veterans to Inpatient Mental Health Care at the Iowa City VA HCS**

1. Mental Health Services

- One-to-one mental health assessment and testing
- Medication management
- One-to-one psychotherapy, as well as couples and family therapy
- Group therapy for anger and stress, combat support, partners, etc.
- Substance Use Disorder education, evaluation, and treatment
- Caregiver support program for Veterans with mental health disorders
- 15-bed, recovery oriented, acute inpatient mental health unit
- PTSD treatment team that provides education, evaluation, and treatment
- Suicide prevention team
- Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Recovery Center which provides multidisciplinary treatment for Veterans with chronic and serious mental illness
- Mental health intensive case management for Veterans with chronic and serious mental illness
- Support for employment and compensated work therapy programs for Veterans with mental illness
- Extensive services for homeless Veterans
- Veteran Justice Outreach program that liaises with the criminal justice system on behalf of Veterans
- Mental health services in the Women's Health Clinic and the availability of a military sexual trauma coordinator
- Mental health services embedded in primary care clinics

2. VA's National Policy on Mental Health Admissions to Inpatient Units

VHA Handbook 1160.06, *Inpatient Mental Health Services*, states that admission to inpatient mental health care must be available to all eligible Veterans who require hospital level care for a mental health condition, either in the VHA medical facility where they are being treated, in a nearby VA facility, or at non-VA care.

REACH VET

Recovery Engagement And Coordination for Health – Veterans Enhanced Treatment

An effort of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Office for Suicide Prevention



The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) manages the largest integrated health care system in the country and is committed to providing Veterans with timely access to high-quality health care and mental health services and support. The Department's comprehensive, evidence-based treatments and programs serve the mental health needs of all Veterans in our care as well as those of their family members. VA provides a continuum of forward-looking outpatient, residential, and inpatient mental health services across the country with many entry points for care, including more than **150 medical centers**; **820 community-based outpatient clinics**; **300 Vet Centers** that provide readjustment counseling; the **Veterans Crisis Line** phone, chat, and text-messaging support; **300 Suicide Prevention Coordinators** (with at least one located at every VA Medical Center); and a **national network of VA staff** working on college and university campuses, among other outreach efforts.

Proactively addressing complex health care needs, including mental health concerns, can lead to better recovery outcomes, lessen the likelihood of challenges becoming crises, and reduce the stress that Veterans and their loved ones face. VA's health care providers and mental health professionals are trained to help Veterans identify and solve problems, but sometimes additional support is beneficial even before problems become apparent.

VA developed the innovative **Recovery Engagement And Coordination for Health – Veterans Enhanced Treatment (REACH VET)** to help identify Veterans who may benefit from enhanced care. Through **REACH VET**, VA clinicians can:



Contact identified Veterans to collaboratively review their health care.



Review Veterans' diagnoses, mental health conditions, and risk factors.



Ensure that Veterans are able to access care, including transportation to appointments.



Consider appropriate enhancement strategies, such as safety planning or increased monitoring during stressful life events.

While preventing Veteran suicide is VA's goal, many Veterans identified by **REACH VET** may not be thinking about suicide. **REACH VET** helps ensure that the most vulnerable Veterans, who may be at risk for suicide, are receiving the care they need. Over the next year, **REACH VET** will be introduced at all VA Medical Centers nationwide, bringing proactive, enhanced care to Veterans with complex health care needs.



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs