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## United States Senate

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November 5, 2019

The Honorable Robert Wilkie  
Secretary of U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary Wilkie,

Since your confirmation, I have been encouraged to see your efforts to examine the underlying causes of veteran suicide, including hiring world-renown mental health experts to strengthen mental health services for veterans, and educating the public on this issue through public awareness campaigns.

Despite an increased focus on this crisis, veterans continue to take their own lives. According to the VA's *National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report*, over 6,100 veterans committed suicide in 2017, which accounts for a 2 percent increase in veteran suicide rates from the prior year and nearly a 6 percent increase since 2005.<sup>1</sup> This serves as a sober reminder that more work lies ahead to effectively address this problem.

Tackling veteran suicide has been a continued priority of mine in the Senate. Just this year, President Trump signed into law a bill I cosponsored, the *Honoring America's Veterans in Extreme Need Act*, which protects the economic security of veterans experiencing financial hardship – an important step forward as economic insecurity has been identified as one of the causes of suicide among veterans. Another important step is working toward ensuring that veterans have timely access to care to maintain a healthy lifestyle both physically and mentally. Last year, I introduced the bipartisan *Veterans E-Health and Telemedicine Support (VETS) Act*, which was included in the landmark *VA MISSION Act* and permits all licensed VA health providers to practice telemedicine across state lines. This is a critical step in guaranteeing access to care for veterans.

Last year, as described in my letter to you in 2018, there were disturbing reports of misuse of VA funds that were intended for suicide prevention outreach. Your response outlined steps the VA is taking to combat veteran suicide. I am writing to request an update on how the VA is continuing this work to address the known contributing factors to high veteran suicide rates. Please provide written responses to the following questions to Brian Fahey ([brian\\_fahey@ernst.senate.gov](mailto:brian_fahey@ernst.senate.gov), (202) 224-0523) on my staff by November 18, 2019:

1. How is the Department working to provide employment opportunities for veterans? How can the VA connect with employers in small, more rural communities where many of the veterans I represent live?

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2019/2019\\_National\\_Veteran\\_Suicide\\_Prevention\\_Annual\\_Report\\_508.pdf](https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2019/2019_National_Veteran_Suicide_Prevention_Annual_Report_508.pdf)

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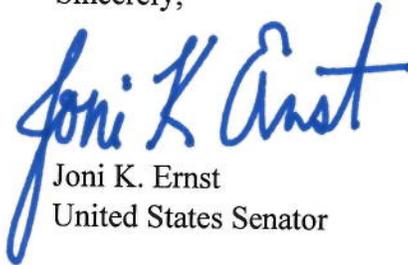
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2. How is the Department working with public and private entities to reduce veteran homelessness? What recommendations do you have for fully addressing this issue?
3. Have wait times decreased since the passage of the landmark VA MISSION Act? What is the average wait time for a veteran to see a mental health prescriber? What role can telemedicine play in reducing wait times? Are there remaining challenges for patients and providers to optimize the telemedicine program?
4. Finally, how is the department conducting suicide prevention outreach? Are there additional resources needed in order to reach veterans across the country?

I look forward to receiving your responses and, again, I thank you for your continued attention to this matter. I am committed to working with you and your Department to reach veterans in every corner of our country and bring an end to this growing crisis.

Sincerely,



Joni K. Ernst  
United States Senator