

JONI K. ERNST
IOWA

WASHINGTON, DC OFFICE
111 RUSSELL SENATE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20510
PHONE: 202-224-3254
FAX: 202-224-9369
WWW.ERNST.SENATE.GOV

United States Senate

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December 19, 2018

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

Dear Secretary Wilkie:

I am writing in response to disturbing media reports regarding the lackluster performance of Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) suicide prevention services. Congress has provided appropriations to the VA in order to target these taxpayer dollars to help veterans in crisis. We fully expect that these dollars be used in the most efficient and effective way possible.

According to a recently released Government Accountability Office (GAO) report, suicide prevention services at the VA fell from 339 in 2016 to 157 in 2017. Through October of this year, there have only been 47 outreach efforts. Furthermore, in 2017, the VA was appropriated \$1.7 million for suicide prevention outreach. Yet, the VA only spent about \$136,000 or 8 percent of the \$1.7 million originally allocated.

With approximately 20 veteran suicides every day in the United States, this lack of outreach is simply unacceptable. Suicide not only impacts that veteran that was suffering and chose to take his or her life, but it has a significant emotional, mental, and physical toll on families and communities. These men and women have selflessly sacrificed in defense of our freedoms and our way of life. They deserve nothing less than the benefits they were promised and the highest quality of care, including quality mental health services.

I am profoundly disappointed to learn that the VA has fallen short in fulfilling this responsibility. We can and must do better for our veterans. To ensure that the VA is fulfilling its mission and that new accountable measures will be put in place to ensure that veterans have proper suicide prevention efforts going forward, please answer the following questions.

- Do you agree with the GAO's analysis? If so, do you have an explanation for why this lack of performance was able to continue?
- Why did the VA not use the full appropriation it was provided?
- Will the VA commit to increase its suicide prevention outreach efforts? What steps is it undertaking to do so?
- What safeguards do you have in place to ensure that the program functions better in the future?

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter. Please direct your response to Hyder Chowdhry in my office. He can be reached at hyder_chowdhry@ernst.senate.gov.

Sincerely,


United States Senator
Joni K. Ernst

DES MOINES OFFICE
733 FEDERAL BUILDING
210 WALNUT STREET
DES MOINES, IA 50309
PHONE: 515-284-4574
FAX: 515-284-4937

CEDAR RAPIDS OFFICE
111 SEVENTH AVENUE SE
SUITE 480
CEDAR RAPIDS, IA 52401
PHONE: 319-365-4504
FAX: 319-365-4683

DAVENPORT OFFICE
201 WEST SECOND STREET
SUITE 806
DAVENPORT, IA 52801
PHONE: 563-322-0677
FAX: 563-322-0854

SIoux CITY OFFICE
194 FEDERAL BUILDING
320 SIXTH STREET
SIoux CITY, IA 51101
PHONE: 712-252-1550
FAX: 712-252-1638

COUNCIL BLUFFS OFFICE
221 FEDERAL BUILDING
8 SOUTH SIXTH STREET
COUNCIL BLUFFS, IA 51501
PHONE: 712-352-1167
FAX: 712-352-0087