

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-1904

February 13, 2020

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

Dear Secretary Wilkie:

Thank you for your continued support of mental health care for our nation's veterans, as well as for your commitment to ending the scourge of veteran suicide. I write today concerning the Veterans Crisis Line (VCL), which has been an invaluable, life-saving resource for hundreds of veterans every single day.

I was recently informed of an incident in Maine in which the VCL received an urgent text from a veteran in distress. Three of the four public databases VCL uses to match names with telephone numbers identified the veteran as living in Maine. When local police arrived at the address identified by VCL, they discovered that the phone number actually belonged to a different individual living in Texas. In fact, the veteran in Maine had previously used the number while living in Texas but had surrendered it roughly five years ago. Police officers were able to track the location of the current phone number registrant and passed the information to a local police department in Texas.

To the VCL's great credit, the response time between receiving the veteran's text and having a local police officer knock on the individual's door was less than 20 minutes. VCL was also able to quickly cross reference the name of the person they believed to be associated with the phone number to VA databases in order to confirm that he was a veteran. However, it appears there may be gaps in VCL's ability to associate specific phone numbers with the correct names and addresses of individuals who contact VCL.

The Veterans Crisis Line has made significant improvements over the years. As you noted recently in congressional testimony, the average wait time for a caller to speak to a live person at VCL is eight seconds, and VCL receives 1,700 calls nearly every day. Indeed, a July 2019 VA Office of Inspector General (VAOIG) report noted that the IG last year had closed several prior recommendations to VCL, meaning VA has been successful in addressing many prior shortcomings. However, VAOIG raised one new recommendation related to ensuring a caller's correct location can be found for local emergency dispatch.

I respectfully request that you provide me an update on actions taken by VA on this VAOIG recommendation, as well as any information concerning tools or resources the VCL might be able to use that are not available to it at this time, such as phone number registration databases that are available to law enforcement organizations.

I appreciate VA's continued focus on this issue, which was demonstrated by the budget request recently submitted to Congress which proposes increasing funding for suicide prevention by \$76 million over last year. As a senior member of the Senate Appropriations Committee and the subcommittee that provides annual funding for VA, I stand ready to support VA in its mental health care and suicide prevention efforts.

Again, thank you for your work supporting Maine veterans and veterans throughout our great nation.

Sincerely,



Susan M. Collins  
United States Senator