Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

September 30, 2016

The Honorable Sloan Gibson
Deputy Secretary
U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue , NW
Washington DC 20420

Deputy Secretary Gibson:

As you know, our nation is in the midst of a veterans suicide emergency as roughly 20 veterans commit suicide every single day. Given these alarming and tragic statistics, we write to express our deep concern with recent reports of failures of the Veterans Crisis Line and to request an update on progress made by the VA to address these issues.

The breakdowns of the VCL were outlined in the recent report from the Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General (VAOIG) which details significant problems with caller response and quality assurance of the VCL. This report found multiple inefficiencies within the VCL that led to veterans' calls going to voicemail and being placed on hold. In addition, it identified instances where callers did not receive immediate assistance and a general lack of quality assurance. Overall the VAOIG report made seven recommendations to the VA in regards to the VCL.

In addition to issues raised in the VAOIG report, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) recently conducted a review of the VCL and found that the VA is not meeting its call response time goals, and that roughly 73% of calls are answered at the VCL headquarters, while the remaining calls are sent to backup facilities. Furthermore, this study found that the VA has not established sufficient monitoring and performance indicators for calls that are sent to backup call centers.

Over the past year the VA has attempted to make significant changes to the VCL to improve its service to veterans. Specifically, VA responded to the 7 recommendations of the VAOIG with specific improvements to each recommendation and a completion date for each improvement. These improvements include new employee orientation, an updated call monitoring program, and establishing a formal quality assurance process and more.

Given your agency's commitment to remedy these issues and the overwhelming public interest in holding the VA accountable to its responsibilities, we respectfully request a detailed response to the following questions by October 15, 2016. Since the VA has been pursuing reforms in this area over the past year and has identified September 30 as the latest target date for improvements to the VCL in its VAOIG response, we believe this is sufficient time for the VA to respond.

1) Has VA completed all of the improvements related to the seven VAOIG recommendations on schedule, including the improvements whose target for completion is September 30?

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2) As the VAOIG report points out, the number of calls into the VCL has drastically increased in recent years. Will the changes made by the VA be sufficient to handle these calls in years to come if this trend continues? What changes will the VCL need to make in order to handle increased calls in the future?

3) VA officials have stated to the House Committee on Veterans Affairs that it is their goal to have every call to the VCL by a veteran in crisis answered promptly by an experienced responder at the by the end of this year. Is the VA on track to meet this goal?

4) Did the VA add any further updates of improvements to the VCL in response to the GAO report in June of this year? If so, what improvements has VA made?

We know that the individuals at the VA would agree that veteran suicide is a critical issue that has become worse in recent years. With a veteran committing suicide nearly every 72 minutes and veteran suicide rates far surpassing those of civilians it is evident that the VA must do more to ensure our veterans are receiving the time critical care that they need. Veteran suicide is a complex problem that reaches beyond the VCL, but in their most critical hour, we must make sure that veterans are receiving the support they need. That is why we are seeking answers to these questions, to ensure that VA is taking the necessary strides to provide that critical support, and we look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Blaine Luetkemeyer
Member of Congress

Mark Amodei
Member of Congress

Dave Brat
Member of Congress

Charles W. Boustany, Jr., M.D.
Member of Congress

Earl "Buddy" Carter
Member of Congress

Kevin Cramer
Member of Congress

Chris Collins
Member of Congress

Brenda Lawrence
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Frank A. LoBiondo
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Dave Loebsack
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