

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-3202

March 2, 2023

The Honorable Denis McDonough
United States Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough:

As we begin this Congress, it remains critically important to focus our attention on those who bravely served our country. Suicide rates among veterans are, on average, 1.5 times higher than those who have not served in the military. We commend the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for its efforts to address the crisis of veteran suicide, including the recent announcement that the VA will now provide emergency mental health care to eligible veterans free of charge.¹

The VA's 2022 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report represents a step in the right direction with the addition of information regarding suicide among veteran subpopulations as defined by engagement with the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA).² While commenting on the 2022 report, you stated:

*"This year's report shows real progress, but there is still so much work to be done. One Veteran suicide is one too many, and VA will continue to work with our federal, state, local and private partners to tackle this problem and save Veterans' lives"*³

We agree that a community-wide effort is necessary to fully understand the various factors that may contribute to veteran suicide, especially as discrepancies between state and federal data paint a different picture of the scope of veteran suicide. This past September, America's Warrior Partnership (AWP) published its interim report on Operative Deep Dive, a project meant to combine local, state, and federal data to gain a comprehensive view of the crisis of veteran suicide. Strikingly, the report from Operation Deep Dive found that former service members take their life at a 2.4 times greater rate than previously reported by the VA.⁴

¹ Ill, Leo Shane. 2023. *Military times: VA to pay for all emergency mental health care starting next week*. January 13. <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2023/01/13/va-to-pay-for-all-emergency-mental-health-care-starting-next-week/>.

² U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention. 2022. *2022 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report*. September 19. Accessed January 19, 2023. <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2022/2022-National-Veteran-Suicide-Prevention-Annual-Report-FINAL-508.pdf>

³ Affairs, VA Office of Public and Intergovernmental. 19. VA releases report showing decrease in Veteran Suicides, names suicide prevention grantees and finalists. September 2022. Accessed January 19, 2023. <https://www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=5823>.

⁴ America's Warrior Partnership. Operation Deep Dive™ (OpDD) Summary of Interim Report. September 2022. Accessed January 19, 2023. <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/VR/VR00/20220929/115166/HHRG-117-VR00-Wstate-LorraineJ-20220929-SD001.pdf>

These reports make clear that there are discrepancies between state, local, and federal veteran suicide data that must be addressed. Although there have been numerous attempts by organizations like AWP to obtain such data, the VA has yet to provide such data under their Title 38 obligation⁵ as well as their VHA directive⁶ to share such information with our community partners for these purposes. Access to these crucial datasets will help understand the veteran's journey from separation to the healthcare services they have earned. While data security and privacy of our veterans is paramount, organizations like AWP regularly work with other federal and state agencies and worked through these same concerns to form meaningful partnerships. We strongly encourage the VA to end the unnecessary wait and commit to working with those organizations like AWP that are committed to the same goal: ending veteran suicide.

We are confident VHA will affirm its commitment to data transparency and honor its obligation to work with research-based organizations to continue to shed light on the crisis of veteran suicide in America. Thank you for taking the time to look into this issue, and we look forward to working your team to combat the veteran suicide crisis throughout the 118th Congress.

Sincerely,



Andrew R. Garbarino
Member of Congress



Aumua Amata Radewagen
Member of Congress



Josh Gottheimer
Member of Congress



Max Miller
Member of Congress



Mark Amodei
Member of Congress



Thomas H. Kean, Jr.
Member of Congress

⁵ 38 CFR § 1.488 (2020)

⁶ VHA publication 1605.01 [Privacy and Release of Information](#), 105HIG - Health Information Governance. VHA Publications. August 31, 2016. Accessed January 19, 2023.

<https://www.va.gov/vhapublications/publications.cfm?pub=1&order=asc&orderby=issue>