

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 30, 2017

The Honorable Rodney P. Frelinghuysen
Chairman
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. House of Representatives
H-305 The Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Nita M. Lowey
Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. House of Representatives
1016 Longworth HOB
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Charlie Dent
Chairman
Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on the Military Construction,
Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies
U.S. House of Representatives
HVC-227 The Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Debbie Wasserman Schultz
Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on the Military Construction,
Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies
U.S. House of Representatives
1016 Longworth HOB
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Frelinghuysen, Ranking Member Lowry, Chairman Dent, and Ranking Member Wasserman Schultz—

As you begin work on the fiscal year (FY) 2018 Military Construction, Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies bill, we urge you to retain language that ensures veterans, service members and family members concerned about their well-being receive immediate assistance from a trained professional when they call the Veterans Crisis Line.

Accordingly, we ask that you include language similar to the following:

Veterans Crisis Line and Backup Centers

“SEC. ____. *The Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall ensure that the toll-free suicide hotline under section 1720F(h) of title 38, United States Code—*

(1) provides to individuals who contact the hotline immediate assistance from a trained professional; and

(2) adheres to all requirements of the American Association of Suicidology.”

The language requested was offered during last year’s appropriations process and was ultimately included in [H.R. 5325](#), the Continuing Appropriations and Military Construction, Veterans

Affairs, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 2017, and Zika Response and Preparedness Act. We ask that this language be retained for FY18.

In 2007, H.R. 327, the [Joshua Omvig Veterans Suicide Prevent Act](#), required the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to establish and implement a fully inclusive program designed to diminish the incidence of suicide among veterans, specifically authorizing the development of a toll-free hotline staffed by trained professionals. The Veteran Crisis Line (VCL) under the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) was established in 2007 as a result. According to its website, “The Veteran Crisis Line has answered nearly 2 million calls and initiated the dispatch of emergency services to callers in crisis over 53,000 times.” VCL staff has also responded to more than 67,000 texts and participated in more than 332,000 chats. This resource has proven to be an invaluable tool for protecting the well-being of our nation’s heroes.

On February 11, 2016, the Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General (OIG) released [Report No. 14-03540-123](#), an investigation into concerns raised about the VCL. In that report, the investigation found “that some calls routed to crisis backup centers went into a voicemail system and that the Veterans Crisis Line and backup center staff did not always offer immediate assistance to callers...These incidents involved responders allegedly ending calls without providing assistance, inappropriately transferring calls, and telling callers to contact another organization...In addition, [the OIG] found that callers could be placed on hold in a backup center queue or be passed through several backup centers for an unknown period of time, which could account for the perception that the calls were not answered.” On March 20, 2017, the OIG released another report, [No. 16-03985-181](#), which further evaluated the VCL. That report produced some troubling findings including “that VCL staff did not respond adequately to a veteran’s urgent needs during multiple calls to the VCL and its backup call centers” and that “supervisory staff did not identify the deficiencies in their internal review of the matter. Further, the OIG concluded that “[in] the report we published previously [...] we made seven recommendations. In response to OIG recommendations for improvement, VHA agreed to a completion deadline of September 30, 2016. All recommendations remain open as of the publication of this report.”

The American Association of Suicidology standards mandate that crisis center responders “be available to answer a dedicated phone number 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.” However, backup VCL centers have previously placed callers on hold and utilized voicemail. The language requested in our letter seeks to correct these issues and ensure quality care for our nation’s veterans and service members. It is inexcusable that veterans, service members or family members concerned about their well-being would receive a voicemail or delayed response when they contact the Veterans Crisis Line expecting an immediate response from a trained professional.

Professional and timely assistance on the Veterans Crisis Line is literally a matter of life. We appreciate the committee's leadership on the issue by including this language request in previous years. The March 2017 OIG report shows that this direction from Congress is still very much needed. The Veterans Crisis Line is an important service dedicated to serving our nation's heroes that are having a mental health crisis or experiencing suicidal thoughts. The VCL website clearly states, "When you call the Veterans Crisis Line, use the online chat, or send a text message, you will receive direct, immediate support from a trained VA responder." Our language request ensures that promise is honored.

We thank you for your consideration of this request, and for your leadership on the committee,

Sincerely,



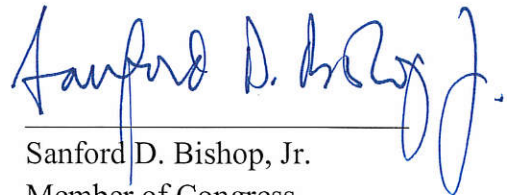
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Member of Congress



Keith Ellison
Member of Congress



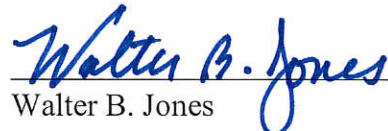
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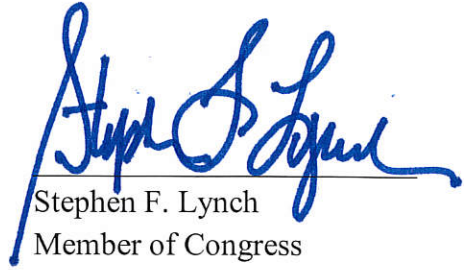
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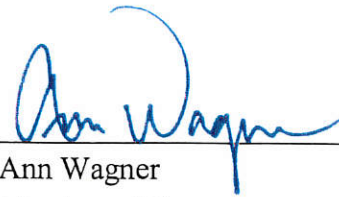
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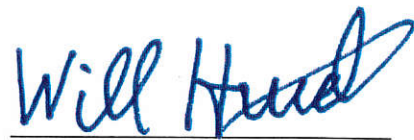
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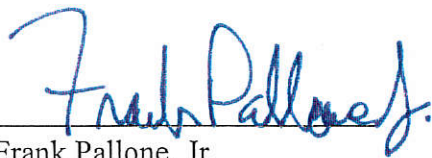
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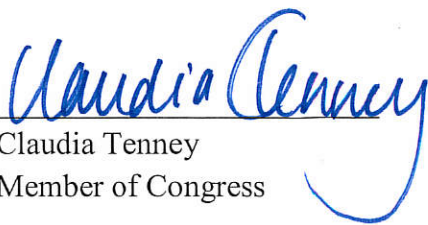
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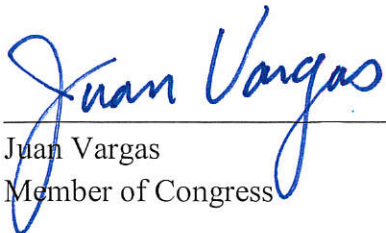
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