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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 2, 2015

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

Dear Secretary McDonald:

There can be no doubt that this country is facing a veteran suicide emergency. This fact was placed in particularly stark relief by a recent New York Times article telling the story of the Second Battalion, Seventh Marine Regiment, which deployed in Afghanistan in 2008. Since then, at least 13 members of the battalion have killed themselves – a suicide rate 14 times that for the American population as a whole. One of those lost was Clay Hunt, the namesake of legislation that I was honored to lead in the Senate and proud to work with you to pass. Although the law named for Clay represents a significant achievement, the ongoing crisis faced by his comrades in arms vividly and disturbingly illustrates how much remains to be done. This problem has numerous aspects, but I write today specifically to express serious concern about the number of mental health vacancies across the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and to ask for your commitment and plan to fill these positions.

The number of veterans relying on VA mental health treatment has dramatically increased – from about 900,000 in 2006 to more than 1.4 million in 2014 – and it is expected to continue rising. Congress recently provided additional resources through the Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act of 2014 (the Access Act) that will allow VA to hire additional medical providers, including mental health professionals. However, the number of qualified professionals hired so far has been simply insufficient to meet the demands for mental health care. Whether this reflects a lack of financial resources, inadequate outreach or human resource staffing, or some combination of these or other issues, VA must act expeditiously to increase its capability to provide mental health care.

The situation in my home state highlights this need. Although VA's Connecticut Health Care System is close to hiring the last of the 13 health care professionals it was allocated under the Access Act, wait times for mental health appointments at some Connecticut facilities average more than five days, which can be too long for many veterans to wait. I am also concerned that despite the additional resources from the Access Act, the ongoing number of mental health care vacancies in Connecticut remains too high. According to VA data, as of September 11, 2015, there were still approximately 23 vacant positions for mental health professionals in Connecticut – only a slight decrease from the 27 vacancies that existed a year ago. I am deeply concerned that Connecticut's 250,000 veterans may be reluctant to turn to VA for mental health care out of fear that their needs will not be adequately met – a situation that no American veteran should face.

Although I appreciate that VA has taken a number of steps so far, it is essential for veterans to perceive VA as a place that will provide them with real solutions. I know that improving the mental health care veterans receive will require cooperation between VA and Congress, and I look forward to working with you on this urgent challenge. Please respond as soon as possible with your plan to fill the existing mental health vacancies, including your assessment of whether there are legislative changes or additional resources needed from Congress. Thank you for your attention to this vital issue.

Sincerely,



Richard Blumenthal
Ranking Member