

117TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

S. _____

To improve the Veterans Crisis Line of the Department of Veterans Affairs,
and for other purposes.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

Mr. TESTER (for himself and Mr. MORAN) introduced the following bill; which
was read twice and referred to the Committee on _____

A BILL

To improve the Veterans Crisis Line of the Department
of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

3 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE; TABLE OF CONTENTS.**

4 (a) **SHORT TITLE.**—This Act may be cited as the
5 “Revising and Expediting Actions for the Crisis Hotline
6 for Veterans Act” or the “REACH for Veterans Act”.

7 (b) **TABLE OF CONTENTS.**—The table of contents for
8 this Act is as follows:

- Sec. 1. Short title; table of contents.
- Sec. 2. Definitions.

TITLE I—VETERANS CRISIS LINE TRAINING AND QUALITY
MANAGEMENT

2

Subtitle A—Staff Training

- Sec. 101. Review of training for Veterans Crisis Line call responders.
 Sec. 102. Retraining guidelines for Veterans Crisis Line call responders.

Subtitle B—Quality Review and Management

- Sec. 111. Monitoring of calls on Veterans Crisis Line.
 Sec. 112. Quality management processes for Veterans Crisis Line.
 Sec. 113. Annual common cause analysis for callers to Veterans Crisis Line who die by suicide.

Subtitle C—Guidance for High-risk Callers

- Sec. 121. Development of enhanced guidance and procedures for response to calls related to substance use and overdose risk.
 Sec. 122. Review and improvement of standards for emergency dispatch.

Subtitle D—Oversight and Clarification of Staff Roles and Responsibilities

- Sec. 131. Oversight of training of social service assistants and clarification of job responsibilities.

TITLE II—PILOT PROGRAMS AND RESEARCH ON VETERANS
CRISIS LINE

Subtitle A—Pilot Programs

- Sec. 201. Extended safety planning pilot program for Veterans Crisis Line.
 Sec. 202. Crisis line facilitation pilot program.

Subtitle B—Research on Effectiveness

- Sec. 211. Authorization of appropriations for research on effectiveness and opportunities for improvement of Veterans Crisis Line.

TITLE III—TRANSITION OF CRISIS LINE NUMBER

- Sec. 301. Feedback on transition of crisis line number.

1 **SEC. 2. DEFINITIONS.**

2 In this Act:

3 (1) DEPARTMENT.—The term “Department”
 4 means the Department of Veterans Affairs.

5 (2) SECRETARY.—The term “Secretary” means
 6 the Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

7 (3) VETERANS CRISIS LINE.—the term “Vet-
 8 erans Crisis Line” means the toll-free hotline for

1 veterans established under section 1720F(h) of title
2 38, United States Code.

3 **TITLE I—VETERANS CRISIS LINE**
4 **TRAINING AND QUALITY MAN-**
5 **AGEMENT**

6 **Subtitle A—Staff Training**

7 **SEC. 101. REVIEW OF TRAINING FOR VETERANS CRISIS**
8 **LINE CALL RESPONDERS.**

9 (a) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary shall enter into an
10 agreement with an organization outside the Department,
11 such as the American Association of Suicidology, to review
12 the training for Veterans Crisis Line call responders on
13 assisting callers in crisis.

14 (b) COMPLETION OF REVIEW.—The review conducted
15 under subsection (a) shall be completed not later than one
16 year after the date of the enactment of this Act.

17 (c) ELEMENTS OF REVIEW.—The review conducted
18 under subsection (a) shall consist of a review of the train-
19 ing provided by the Department on subjects including risk
20 assessment, lethal means assessment, substance use and
21 overdose risk assessment, safety planning, referrals to
22 care, supervisory consultation, and emergency dispatch.

23 (d) UPDATE OF TRAINING.—If any deficiencies in the
24 training for Veterans Crisis Line call responders are found
25 pursuant to the review under subsection (a), the Secretary

1 shall update such training and associated standards of
2 practice to correct those deficiencies not later than one
3 year after the completion of the review.

4 **SEC. 102. RETRAINING GUIDELINES FOR VETERANS CRISIS**
5 **LINE CALL RESPONDERS.**

6 (a) IN GENERAL.—Not later than one year after the
7 date of the enactment of this Act, the Secretary shall de-
8 velop guidelines on retraining and quality management for
9 when a Veterans Crisis Line call responder has an adverse
10 event or when a quality review check by a supervisor of
11 such a call responder denotes that the call responder needs
12 improvement.

13 (b) ELEMENTS OF GUIDELINES.—The guidelines de-
14 veloped under subsection (a) shall specify the subjects and
15 quantity of retraining recommended and how supervisors
16 should implement increased use of silent monitoring or
17 other performance review mechanisms.

18 **Subtitle B—Quality Review and**
19 **Management**

20 **SEC. 111. MONITORING OF CALLS ON VETERANS CRISIS**
21 **LINE.**

22 (a) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary shall require that
23 not fewer than two calls per month for each Veterans Cri-
24 sis Line call responder be subject to supervisory silent

1 monitoring, which is used to monitor the quality of con-
2 duct by such call responder during the call.

3 (b) BENCHMARKS.—The Secretary shall establish
4 benchmarks for requirements and performance of Vet-
5 erans Crisis Line call responders on supervisory silent
6 monitored calls.

7 (c) QUARTERLY REPORTS.—Not less frequently than
8 quarterly, the Secretary shall submit to the Office of Men-
9 tal Health and Suicide Prevention of the Department of
10 Veterans Affairs a report on occurrence and outcomes of
11 supervisory silent monitoring of calls on the Veterans Cri-
12 sis Line.

13 **SEC. 112. QUALITY MANAGEMENT PROCESSES FOR VET-**
14 **ERANS CRISIS LINE.**

15 Not later than one year after the date of the enact-
16 ment of this Act, the leadership for the Veterans Crisis
17 Line, in partnership with the Office of Mental Health and
18 Suicide Prevention of the Department and the National
19 Center for Patient Safety of the Department, shall estab-
20 lish quality management processes and expectations for
21 staff of the Veterans Crisis Line, including with respect
22 to reporting of adverse events and close calls.

1 **SEC. 113. ANNUAL COMMON CAUSE ANALYSIS FOR CALL-**
2 **ERS TO VETERANS CRISIS LINE WHO DIE BY**
3 **SUICIDE.**

4 (a) IN GENERAL.—Not less frequently than annually,
5 the Secretary shall perform a common cause analysis for
6 all identified callers to the Veterans Crisis Line that died
7 by suicide during the one-year period preceding the con-
8 duct of the analysis before the caller received contact with
9 emergency services and in which the Veterans Crisis Line
10 was the last point of contact.

11 (b) SUBMITTAL OF RESULTS.—The Secretary shall
12 submit to the Office of Mental Health and Suicide Preven-
13 tion of the Department the results of each analysis con-
14 ducted under subsection (a).

15 (c) APPLICATION OF THEMES OR LESSONS.—The
16 Secretary shall apply any themes or lessons learned under
17 an analysis under subsection (a) to updating training and
18 standards of practice for staff of the Veterans Crisis Line.

19 **Subtitle C—Guidance for High-risk**
20 **Callers**

21 **SEC. 121. DEVELOPMENT OF ENHANCED GUIDANCE AND**
22 **PROCEDURES FOR RESPONSE TO CALLS RE-**
23 **LATED TO SUBSTANCE USE AND OVERDOSE**
24 **RISK.**

25 Not later than one year after the date of the enact-
26 ment of this Act, the Secretary, in consultation with na-

1 tional experts within the Department on substance use
2 disorder and overdose, shall—

3 (1) develop enhanced guidance and procedures
4 to respond to calls to the Veterans Crisis Line re-
5 lated to substance use and overdose risk;

6 (2) update training materials for staff of the
7 Veterans Crisis Line in response to such enhanced
8 guidance and procedures; and

9 (3) update criteria for monitoring compliance
10 with such enhanced guidance and procedures.

11 **SEC. 122. REVIEW AND IMPROVEMENT OF STANDARDS FOR**
12 **EMERGENCY DISPATCH.**

13 (a) IN GENERAL.—Not later than one year after the
14 date of the enactment of this Act, the Secretary shall—

15 (1) review the current emergency dispatch
16 standard operating procedure of the Veterans Crisis
17 Line to identify any additions to such procedure to
18 strengthen communication regarding—

19 (A) emergency dispatch for disconnected
20 callers; and

21 (B) the role of social service assistants in
22 requesting emergency dispatch and recording
23 such dispatches; and

24 (2) update such procedure to include the addi-
25 tions identified under paragraph (1).

1 (b) TRAINING.—The Secretary shall ensure that all
2 staff of the Veterans Crisis Line are trained on all updates
3 made under subsection (a)(2) to the emergency dispatch
4 standard operating procedure of the Veterans Crisis Line.

5 **Subtitle D—Oversight and Clari-**
6 **fication of Staff Roles and**
7 **Responsibilities**

8 **SEC. 131. OVERSIGHT OF TRAINING OF SOCIAL SERVICE AS-**
9 **SISTANTS AND CLARIFICATION OF JOB RE-**
10 **SPONSIBILITIES.**

11 Not later than one year after the date of the enact-
12 ment of this Act, the Secretary shall—

13 (1) establish oversight mechanisms to ensure
14 that social service assistants and supervisory social
15 service assistants working with the Veterans Crisis
16 Line are appropriately trained and implementing
17 guidance of the Department regarding the Veterans
18 Crisis Line; and

19 (2) refine standard operating procedures to de-
20 lineate roles and responsibilities for all levels of su-
21 pervisory social service assistants working with the
22 Veterans Crisis Line.

1 **TITLE II—PILOT PROGRAMS AND**
2 **RESEARCH ON VETERANS**
3 **CRISIS LINE**

4 **Subtitle A—Pilot Programs**

5 **SEC. 201. EXTENDED SAFETY PLANNING PILOT PROGRAM**
6 **FOR VETERANS CRISIS LINE.**

7 (a) IN GENERAL.—Commencing not later than 180
8 days after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Sec-
9 retary shall carry out a pilot program to determine wheth-
10 er a lengthier, templated safety plan used in clinical set-
11 tings could be applied in call centers for the Veterans Cri-
12 sis Line.

13 (b) BRIEFING.—Not later than two years after the
14 date of the enactment of this Act, the Secretary shall brief
15 Congress on the findings of the Secretary under the pilot
16 program under subsection (a), including such rec-
17 ommendations as the Secretary may have for continuation
18 or discontinuation of the pilot program.

19 **SEC. 202. CRISIS LINE FACILITATION PILOT PROGRAM.**

20 (a) IN GENERAL.—Commencing not later than one
21 year after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Sec-
22 retary shall carry out a pilot program on the use of crisis
23 line facilitation to increase use of the Veterans Crisis Line
24 among high-risk veterans.

1 (b) BRIEFING.—Not later than two years after the
2 date of the enactment of this Act, the Secretary shall brief
3 Congress on the findings of the Secretary under the pilot
4 program under subsection (a), including such rec-
5 ommendations as the Secretary may have for continuation
6 or discontinuation of the pilot program.

7 (c) DEFINITIONS.—In this section:

8 (1) CRISIS LINE FACILITATION.—The term
9 “crisis line facilitation”, with respect to a high-risk
10 veteran, means the presentation by a therapist of
11 psychoeducational information about the Veterans
12 Crisis Line and a discussion of the perceived bar-
13 riers and facilitators to future use of the Veterans
14 Crisis Line for the veteran, which culminates in the
15 veteran calling the Veterans Crisis Line with the
16 therapist to provide firsthand experiences that may
17 counter negative impressions of the Veterans Crisis
18 Line.

19 (2) HIGH-RISK VETERAN.—The term “high-risk
20 veteran” means a veteran receiving inpatient mental
21 health care following a suicidal crisis.

1 **Subtitle B—Research on**
2 **Effectiveness**

3 **SEC. 211. AUTHORIZATION OF APPROPRIATIONS FOR RE-**
4 **SEARCH ON EFFECTIVENESS AND OPPORTU-**
5 **NITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT OF VETERANS**
6 **CRISIS LINE.**

7 There is authorized to be appropriated to the Sec-
8 retary \$5,000,000 for the Mental Illness Research, Edu-
9 cation, and Clinical Centers of the Department to conduct
10 research on the effectiveness of the Veterans Crisis Line
11 and areas for improvement for the Veterans Crisis Line.

12 **TITLE III—TRANSITION OF**
13 **CRISIS LINE NUMBER**

14 **SEC. 301. FEEDBACK ON TRANSITION OF CRISIS LINE NUM-**
15 **BER.**

16 (a) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary shall solicit feed-
17 back from veterans service organizations on how to con-
18 duct outreach to members of the Armed Forces, veterans,
19 their family members, and other members of the military
20 and veterans community on the move to 988 as the new,
21 national three-digit suicide and mental health crisis hot-
22 line, which is expected to be implemented by July 2022,
23 to minimize confusion and ensure veterans are aware of
24 their options for reaching the Veterans Crisis Line.

1 (b) NONAPPLICATION OF FACCA.—The Federal Advi-
2 sory Committee Act (5 U.S.C. App.) shall not apply to
3 any feedback solicited under subsection (a).

4 (c) VETERANS SERVICE ORGANIZATION DEFINED.—
5 In this section, the term “veterans service organization”
6 means an organization recognized by the Secretary for the
7 representation of veterans under section 5902 of title 38,
8 United States Code.