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September 17, 2024

The Honorable Denis R. McDonough
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Mr. Secretary,

I write to express my concern over several recent Veterans Crisis Line (VCL) service disruptions and intermittent access issues, which resulted in disconnected or dropped calls and chats and related challenges. While I recognize the Department took immediate action to address these incidents and attempted to contact callers whose communication with VCL was disrupted, I believe these incidents point to the need for a more comprehensive review of the system's reliability and resilience, backup and redundancy procedures, and related areas to ensure VCL is available every second of every day.

The VCL provides a key service for responding to veterans in crisis and preventing veteran suicide. However, when this service is not functioning properly, veterans experiencing a mental health crisis are at an increased risk for harm that could be mitigated by a VCL crisis responder, who is trained to identify a caller's level of risk for harm and, when appropriate, initiate dispatch of emergency services for those at risk of imminent harm. With the stakes this high, one disconnected or dropped VCL call or chat is too many. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) must take all measures possible to ensure veterans are not impacted by preventable or unexpected technology issues and are able to access the VCL without obstacles.

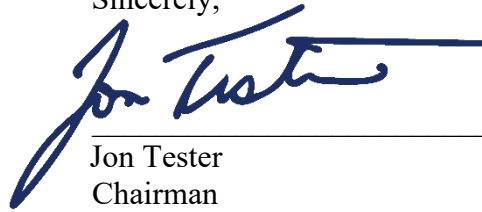
While it appears that in each recent incident the Department – through coordination between the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and the Office of Information and Technology (OIT), the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and relevant local and national telecommunications providers and contractors – acted quickly to resolve the technology issues, rerouted calls, attempted to re-engage all dropped calls or chats, the volume of problems is concerning. VA reported several separate VCL service disruption incidents to Congress over a multi-week period. The frequency of these disruptions indicates that further review of the issues and assertive steps are required to ensure underlying problems are resolved and further resilience measures enhanced.

As part of the comprehensive review of the VCL's technology and communications vulnerabilities and redundancy response plan, I ask VA to also review what actions other Federal agencies, private sector telecommunications providers, and contractors can take to improve VCL. It is important to take this more holistic look in recognition that VA does not control all the factors and infrastructure that determine VCL's operational success and is part of the broader 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline managed by HHS. In addition to the review, please also provide

an update on the status of VA's implementation of the recommendations from the August 2024 VA Office of Inspector General report entitled "Veterans Crisis Line Implementation of 988 Press 1 Preparation and Leaders' Response." While the technology and systems that drive VCL are critical, so are appropriate staffing levels, training, and support for the personnel that manage and answer the calls and texts every day. Without this critically important workforce, VCL could not function.

Thank you for your attention to this request and I look forward to hearing from you on the results of your review and steps the Department is taking to ensure the VCL is well-equipped to respond to our veterans in need of mental health care and support services.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jon Tester". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Jon Tester
Chairman
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs