

**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**  
**Washington, DC 20515-0301**

March 1, 2016

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

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

Dear Chairman Dent and Ranking Member Bishop:

As you begin work on the fiscal year (FY) 2017 Military Construction, Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies bill, we urge you to include 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.”*

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 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.” Veterans Crisis Line staff has also responded to more than 44,000 texts and participated in more than 240,000 chats. This resource has proven to be an invaluable tool for protecting the well-being of our nation’s heroes.

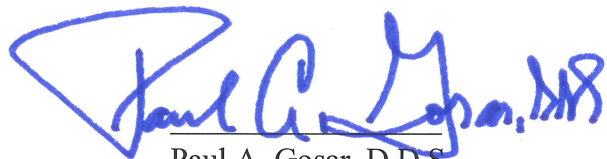
On February 11, 2016, the Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General (IG) released Report No. 14-03540-123, an investigation into concerns raised about the Veterans Crisis Line. That report produced some troubling findings including “that some calls routed to crisis backup centers went 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 IG] 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.”

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 centers currently are allowed to place callers on hold and utilize 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.

Such unresponsiveness is literally a matter of life and death as the Veterans Health Administration determined in August 2010 that veterans account for approximately 20 percent of all suicides in the United States. The Veterans Crisis Line is a toll-free hotline that veterans, military members, or family members of veterans or military members can contact. This important service is dedicated to serving our nation’s heroes that are having a mental health crisis or experiencing suicidal thoughts. The Veterans Crisis Line 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,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Paul A. Gosar, D.D.S.", with a large, stylized initial "P" and "G".

Paul A. Gosar, D.D.S.  
Member of Congress

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Dina Titus", with a stylized "D" and "T".

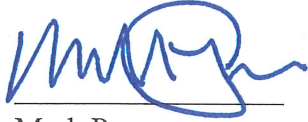
Dina Titus  
Member of Congress



Frederica S. Wilson  
Member of Congress



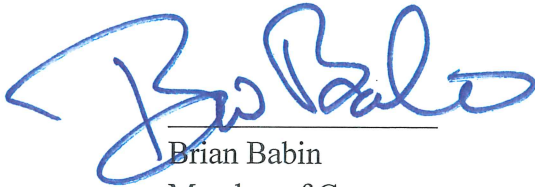
Curt Clawson  
Member of Congress



Mark Pocan  
Member of Congress



Thomas Massie  
Member of Congress



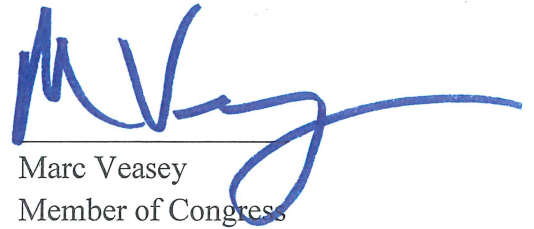
Brian Babin  
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Mark DeSaulnier  
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Tom Marino  
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Marc Veasey  
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Loretta Sanchez  
Member of Congress



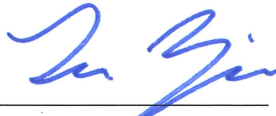
Robin Kelly  
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Matt Cartwright  
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Ron Kind  
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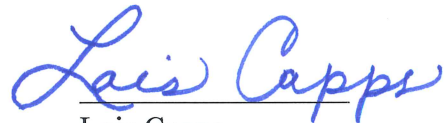
Pete Olson  
Member of Congress



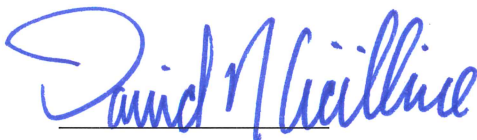
Peter A. DeFazio  
Member of Congress




Chellie Pingree  
Member of Congress



Lois Capps  
Member of Congress



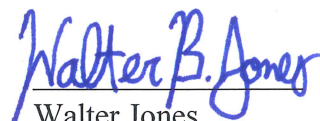
David N. Cicilline  
Member of Congress



Sheila Jackson Lee  
Member of Congress



Keith Ellison  
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Walter Jones  
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Leonard Lance

Leonard Lance  
Member of Congress

Doug Lamborn

Doug Lamborn  
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Red Deutch

Theodore E. Deutch  
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Christopher Gibson  
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Debbie Dingell

Debbie Dingell  
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Beto O'Rourke.

Beto O'Rourke  
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