

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

September 29, 2016

The Honorable Robert A. McDonald
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonald,

We are writing to express grave concerns about the unacceptable practices brought to light by Mr. Greg Hughes, the former director of the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Veterans Crisis Line, which were detailed in an Associated Press article entitled, "Official: One-third of calls to VA suicide hotline roll over."¹ Mr. Hughes' claims about the staff and culture at VA's crisis call center clearly demonstrate a culture completely lacking in accountability. Mr. Hughes claims that employees "spend very little time on the phone or engaged in assigned productive activity." Moreover, Mr. Hughes makes the assertion that staff answer fewer than five calls per day and routinely request to leave early. We respectfully request you provide us with a detailed explanation of how you plan to hold VA employees like the ones Mr. Hughes describes accountable.

Unfortunately, this is not simply a case of one rogue department in the agency, but indicative of the pervasive culture of unaccountability at the agency that has continued despite repeated calls for change by Congress, America's veterans and the public at large. Repeatedly, in hearings highlighting instances of mismanagement where subordinate staff ignores, subverts or refuses to follow directions, we are told that VA will rectify this culture, but change does not come and there is no accountability. The VA's Undersecretary for Health, Dr. David Shulkin, has called for an end to veterans' suicide, naming it as one of VA's top priorities, but once again the reality at the VA doesn't seem to match the rhetoric. Crisis call centers are critical to the VA's mission to end veterans' suicide, which is why it's troubling to read reports that call center operators do not take their responsibilities seriously.

If there is no accountability for failing to perform the duty of taking care of veterans who are thinking about suicide, then in essence we are telling the rest of the VA that there is no behavior they can engage in at work, or line that they can cross, that is serious enough to warrant termination. Failure to hold people accountable for this type of behavior also renders

¹ <https://www.apnews.com/0c2c10e0c6b14b28bd5920790884f5d1/Official:-One-third-of-calls-to-VA-suicide-hotline-roll-over>

meaningless any future proposal for strengthening the hotline since it will be clear that no one will insist on individuals performing their jobs.

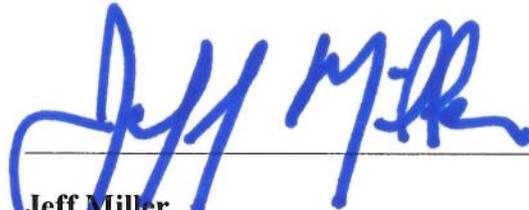
The House Veterans' Affairs Committee has, on numerous occasions, listened to VA officials tell lawmakers they have a plan to improve the culture which prevents VA from being a world-class medical provider. To this point, these words have rung hollow, and there seems to be no plan in place to change the corrosive culture that pervades the system, in order to ensure our veterans receive the best health care available, and the best counseling available in times of crisis.

While we appreciate and thank you for your continued dedication to the veterans of this great nation, this is unacceptable and must be corrected immediately. We look forward to working diligently with you to ensure this situation is corrected and veterans receive the treatment, counseling and community they have earned through their service. We appreciate your prompt consideration of these concerns.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "David P. Roe", written over a horizontal line.

David P. Roe, M.D.
Member of Congress

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jeff Miller", written over a horizontal line.

Jeff Miller
Chairman
House Committee on Veterans Affairs