



CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

April 19, 2022

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

Dear Secretary McDonough,

I am writing to request an update regarding your plans to increase completion rates of the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) evidence-based lethal means safety training among VA employees, community care providers, and family caregivers in order to advance our shared goal of combatting the veteran suicide crisis. I urge you to use your existing authorities to extend the VA's lethal means safety training requirement beyond Veterans Health Administration (VHA) clinical health care providers to include all VA employees who regularly interact with veterans in their work, as well as community care providers and caregivers to the extent practicable.

As you know, lethal means safety training is an evidence-based practice that teaches health care professionals, other VA employees, and caregivers to have conversations with those at risk for suicide about voluntarily limiting access to objects that can be used to inflict self-directed violence.¹ By creating needed time and space between a veteran at risk and a means for self-harm, lethal means safety training helps save veterans' lives.

The object most commonly used by veterans to inflict self-directed violence is a firearm: firearms accounted for nearly seven in ten veteran suicides in 2019, the most recent year with available data.² Lethal means safety practices for firearms are proven to be effective: for example, people who kept their firearms locked or unloaded were at least 60 percent less likely to die from firearm-related suicide than those who stored their firearms unlocked, loaded, or both.³

Recognizing the proven effectiveness of lethal means safety, VA requires all VHA clinical health care providers to complete the Department's lethal means safety training course. As a result of the requirement, compliance is already above 90 percent among newly mandated VHA clinical health care providers.⁴ However, the lethal means safety training course remains optional for all other VA employees, as well as community care providers and caregivers.

¹ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs: *Lethal Means Safety & Suicide Prevention*.
<https://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn19/lethalmeanssafety/>. Accessed November 5, 2021.

² U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs: *2021 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report*. September 2021.

³ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs: *Improving the Safety of Lethal Means Prevents Suicide*. 2019.

⁴ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs: *Questions for the Record Responses on the "Restoring Faith by Building Trust: VA's First 100 Days" Oversight Hearing*. Sent June 24, 2021.

The course is available to all of these providers and employees via VHA TRAIN, but completion has been minimal by those for whom it is voluntary. According to data the VA provided to my office in 2021, just 226 people have completed the Department's lethal means safety training course through VHA TRAIN.⁵ The VA further noted that 942,729 active individual community care providers can access the on-demand lethal means safety training via VHA TRAIN, meaning that only a small fraction of one percent of people caring for and interacting with veterans have opted to complete this life-saving training.⁶

VA officials have acknowledged the need for more robust action to increase completion rates of the training, and I have repeatedly encouraged VA to use its existing authorities to take this action. In response to a letter that I sent you on February 9, 2021, your staff affirmed that, "without a national mandate or incentive for non-VA community providers to take this course...VA will likely continue to face notable challenges advancing the mission of increasing the competency of the community and community-based health care providers to better identify, assess, intervene and treat Veterans at risk of suicide."⁷ You also committed to identifying opportunities to use your existing authorities to expand the VA's lethal means safety training requirement when I asked you about the issue during a March 25, 2021 House Veterans' Affairs Committee hearing.⁸ Furthermore, I am still awaiting complete answers from VA to my questions for the record on this topic from September 2021.

Therefore, I respectfully request detailed and prompt written responses from VA to the following questions:

1. According to information provided to my office by the VA's Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention (OMHSP) on March 22, 2021, you currently have the authority to mandate that all Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) employees complete the Department's lethal means safety training.⁹ What plans do you have to implement a requirement for VBA employees who regularly interact with veterans in the course of their work to complete the Department's lethal means safety training and what is your timeline for implementation?
2. What plans do you have to implement a requirement for VHA employees who are not clinical health care providers but still regularly interact with veterans in the course of their work to complete the Department's lethal means safety training and what is your timeline for implementation?
3. OMHSP also told my office that you currently have the authority to mandate that all Vet Center staff complete the Department's lethal means safety training.¹⁰ What plans do you

⁵ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention: *Responses to Follow-Up Questions from March 22, 2021 Briefing on Lethal Means Safety Training with the Office of Representative Underwood*. Sent April 5, 2021.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs: *Letter to Representative Lauren Underwood in response to Representative Underwood's February 9, 2021 letter to Secretary Denis McDonough*. March 22, 2021.

⁸ House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Full Committee Hearing: *Restoring Faith by Building Trust: VA's First 100 Days*. March 25, 2021.

⁹ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs: *Letter to Representative Lauren Underwood in response to Representative Underwood's February 9, 2021 letter to Secretary Denis McDonough*. March 22, 2021.

¹⁰ Ibid.

have to implement a requirement for Vet Center staff to complete the Department's lethal means safety training and what is your timeline for implementation?

4. What plans do you have to implement a requirement for VA compensation and pension examiners to complete the Department's lethal means safety training and what is your timeline for implementation?
5. OMHSP also told my office that the VA cannot currently require community care providers or family caregivers to complete the Department's lethal means safety training.¹¹
 - a. Do you need additional authorities from Congress to be able to require community care providers or family caregivers to complete the Department's lethal means safety training?
 - b. Do you plan to include a requirement for community care providers to complete the Department's lethal means safety training through either a modification to the existing Community Care Network (CCN) contract or a future CCN contract?
 - c. We understand that the VA is developing lethal means safety materials and dissemination strategies to help caregivers and family members engage in lethal means safety conversations with veterans.¹² Can you provide a timeline for when these materials and strategies will be released? Are there other strategies you plan to implement to increase completion rates of the Department's lethal means safety training among participants in the Program of General Caregiver Support Services and in the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers in the absence of a requirement for participants in these programs to complete the training?
6. Does the VA have specific quantitative goals for completion of the Department's lethal means safety training? For example, does the VA seek to have a certain percentage of community care providers complete the Department's lethal means safety training by end of fiscal year 2022?

Please do not hesitate to reach out to my office if you or your staff have any questions about the inquiries listed above. Thank you for your prompt attention to this urgent issue and for your shared commitment to ensuring the well-being of our nation's veterans.

Sincerely,



¹¹ Ibid.

¹² U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs: *Questions for the Record Responses on the "Veteran Suicide Prevention: Innovative Research and Expanded Public Health Efforts."* Oversight Hearing. Sent January 6, 2022.