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COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR

COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

May 21, 2020

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

Dear Secretary Wilkie:

I write to request information on the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) plans to respond to both the long- and short-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on veterans' mental health and on the veteran suicide crisis. I applaud the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) for proactively identifying mental health care as an additional resource need in its COVID-19 Response Plan and look forward to working with you to support these needs to best serve the veterans in VHA's care.¹

The effects of this pandemic on Americans' mental health will be significant and wide-ranging, and experts—including those within VHA—have cautioned that the full scope of these effects may not be clear for months or years.² Families are facing enormous stressors as they struggle to keep their job or small business, access health care, care for their dependents, or grieve the loss of a loved one. Our country's mental health care system, which already had serious gaps, is now further strained by a pandemic that has "negatively affected many people's mental health and created new barriers for people already suffering from mental illness and substance use disorders."³

As you know, veterans face unique challenges when it comes to both mental health and suicide prevention—challenges that may be compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. Suicide rates among veterans, especially those who do not use VHA care, are already at crisis levels. I was deeply concerned when you reported on March 22 that calls to the Veterans Crisis Line (VCL)

¹ Department of Veterans Affairs, *Veterans Health Administration-Office of Emergency Management COVID-19 Response Plan* (March 2020) (https://www.va.gov/opa/docs/VHA_COVID_19_03232020_vF_1.pdf).

² New York Times, *Is the Pandemic Sparking Suicide?* (May 2020).

³ Kaiser Family Foundation, *The Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Use* (April 2020) (<https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/>).

had increased by 12%, with 20% of all calls already related to COVID-19.⁴ It is essential that VA has the resources it needs to handle increased numbers of veterans in crisis and, at the same time, is planning ahead to provide for their long-term health and safety.

The federal government's response to COVID-19 must also be designed to anticipate and meet the specific needs of women veterans, veterans of color, and post-9/11 veterans. These veterans experience higher rates of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress that too often are connected to their time in service.⁵ They are also some of the most vulnerable to the negative economic effects of this pandemic: female veterans have been disproportionately affected by recent job losses, and the post-9/11 cohort comprises nearly half of the total number of unemployed veterans in America.⁶

As a member of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I am committed to working with VA to address the economic, social, and emotional effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on our veterans' mental health. Therefore, I respectfully request that you provide a detailed update on VA's efforts to prepare for and respond to the long- and short-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on veterans' mental health and on the veteran suicide crisis by June 4, 2020. As part of this response, please include up-to-date information on changes in the volume of calls to VCL since March 22, 2020; the effects of COVID-19 on VCL call volume; and broad demographic information related to callers' gender, age, and ethnicity. Additionally, please share how the Department is using resources appropriated in the CARES Act, and whether the Department has identified unmet needs that require additional funding or statutory changes.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter. Please contact Mark Anthony in my office at mark.anthony@mail.house.gov with any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lauren Underwood". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Lauren" and last name "Underwood" clearly distinguishable.

Lauren Underwood

⁴ Connecting Vets, *Calls to Veteran Crisis Hotline Up 12 Percent During COVID-19 Outbreak*, Wilkie Tells VSOs (March 2020).

⁵ House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Testimony of Jennifer Silva, Chief Program Officer, Wounded Warrior Project, *Virtual Hearing on Resilience and Coping: Mental Health of Women Veterans*, 116th Cong. (May 19, 2020).

⁶ Military Times, *Veteran Unemployment Up to Nearly 12 Percent Amid Coronavirus Crisis* (May 2020) (<https://www.militarytimes.com/education-transition/2020/05/08/veteran-unemployment-up-to-nearly-12-percent-amid-coronavirus-crisis/>).