

U.S. House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS

364 CANNON HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515

<http://veterans.house.gov>

January 30, 2023

The Honorable Denis McDonough
Secretary
United States Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough:

I write to you regarding veteran suicides and drug overdose deaths. Specifically, I am requesting further details about the methodology VA uses to compile the data regarding these deaths.

As you may recall, on September 29, 2022, the House Committee on Veterans Affairs held a hearing entitled "*Veteran Suicide Prevention: Capitalizing on What Works and Increasing Innovative Approaches*." The hearing explored many of the issues around suicide prevention and VA's Annual Suicide Report. In testimony, America's Warrior Partnership (AWP) raised concerns highlighted by their Operation Deep Dive study about incomplete data around death by suicide and a belief that the VA is undercounting deaths by failing to account for or acknowledge accidental and drug overdose death.

In addition, AWP discussed the accuracy of data provided by coroners and state medical examiners due to lack of information about veteran status and hesitancy to label deaths as suicides. Another issue is VA's decision to not include veteran deaths in the report that closely mirror the definition of "Self-Injury Mortality (SIM)," because they are often labeled as "Accident/Undetermined" by coroners. Operation Deep Dive is further exploring this issue by gathering state death data and corroborating the records with the Department of Defense.

The Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs shares our concern about how veteran deaths are counted and sent a similar letter in October of 2021. However, many of the questions posed in the Senate letter remain largely unanswered.

Please provide answers to the following questions by no later than February 13, 2023:

- Why is the population of veterans at the national and state level, as determined by VA and used to calculate the suicide rate, different and higher than the number of veterans reported by the Census Bureau? How does this large difference in the denominator impact the national suicide rate?

- A large number of deaths are ruled “accidental or undetermined” by coroners, as opposed to suicide or homicide. AWP has found that many of these undetermined deaths are drug overdose deaths. Does VA have a methodology that could categorize manners of death that are deemed by a coroner as “accidental or undetermined” as preventable? If so, why is it not included in the VA suicide report?
- Why doesn't VA include overdose fatalities or other non-natural causes of death in their suicide report? And would VA consider adding a section in the VA suicide report to capture these numbers?
- Does VA collect data on overdose deaths of veterans, and by what substances? If so, please share the list of drug classifications with the number of connected deaths for the last year collected. If not, why not?
- Does VA have any plan in place to make a tool available to coroners and state medical examiners that can help verify veteran status?
- Why are Guard and Reserve members not included in the veteran suicide report? Is there a way to account for these members who utilize VA services or who are classified as veterans when not activated?
- Explain the process by which VA shares data with academic partners for the purposes of research. What barriers exist that prevent the sharing of records or data for the purposes of research and how may the Committee help facilitate greater collaboration?

As this Congress moves forward, veteran suicide will remain one of my top priorities. As a veteran, I share your passion in finding solutions and hope that VA can work with the Committee and the veteran community to better identify trends helpful in addressing this pressing issue. Should you have any questions about this request please contact Christine Hill at christine.hill@mail.house.gov. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



MIKE BOST
Chairman

Cc: The Honorable Mark Takano, Ranking Member