

Member Organizations:

24th Infantry Regiment
Buffalo Soldiers
Chicago Chapter

555th Parachute
Infantry Association
"Triple Nickle"
Chicago Chapter

American Legion
Dorie Miller Post 915

Blind Veterans
Association
Chicago Chapter

Disabled American
Veterans
Chicago Chapter 6

Montford Point Marine
Association
Chicago Chapter

Muslim American
Veterans Association
Chicago Chapter

National Women
Veterans United

Veterans of Foreign
Wars
Major Harris Post 2024

Veterans for Peace
Chicago Chapter

Veterans for Unification

Veterans Strike Force

Vietnam Veterans
of America
Chapter 311

VetNet

April 28, 2014

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Attention: Secretary Eric K. Shinseki
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington DC 20420

Dear Secretary Shinseki,

We are writing to focus your attention on the dire need to correct the life-threatening shortcomings of the Crisis Hot Line.

The National Women Veterans United (NWVU), a member organization of the Coalition of Veterans Organizations (CVO), has conducted a test of the VA Crisis Hot Line (1-800-273-8255) and found it to be seriously deficient. Upon calling the Crisis Hot Line, we found that on at least one occasion we were answered by a voicemail message committing to a response within 24 to 48 hours. On other occasions, the person answering the Hot Line told the caller to get in touch with the local VA facility without offering immediate assistance. At another time there was no answer on the Hot Line, not even a recording. Clearly there was no back up. That particular veteran had contemplated suicide and attempted to self-mutilate. Still further, a member of the Harold Washington Post of the American Legion reported that they contacted the Hot Line with an immediate need for assistance; an ambulance failed to arrive for three hours. On several occasions it became clear that the person answering the Hot Line was not properly trained in responding to the needs of the caller and in marshaling resources necessary to meet the crisis.

As you are undoubtedly aware, the veterans who call the Hot Line are in immediate danger to themselves and/or others. They are often distraught, suicidal, homicidal and depressed. Many may be intoxicated or otherwise self-medicated and usually in need of the most highly trained, expert response. They may even be armed. With this in mind, it is painful to imagine that while lives are at stake, a system that was put in place to save lives is not functioning in that capacity. Even worse is that your staff—to which these failures have been reported—have not addressed this issue with the urgency it demands.

We cannot over-emphasize that it is unacceptable to have an inept system that is supposed to save lives. We can not and will not just stand by and do nothing. We strongly urge you to provide the necessary resources for the Crisis Hot Line to ensure it is operating with consistency and—most importantly—that it is effective in responding to our comrades who reach out to the Hot Line for help.

Along those lines, we recommend the following measures be implemented at once:

- Change the Crisis Hot Line to a system that mirrors a 911 emergency call center where a live person will respond to each and every caller and where there is a back-up system

when calls go into a cue because all operators are on other calls. That is, calls can be diverted to on-call personnel that are crisis-trained professionals and who can determine if an actual 911 call is warranted.

- Implement a system that can be recorded and monitored and ensure that the recordings are used in round-table training sessions that employ benchmarks to improve service delivery and caution staff on existing shortcomings. This will ensure that every staff person is providing the level of care and assistance required to carry out the intent of the Hot Line mission.
- Ensure that professional crisis responders can provide adequate but sensitive information to law enforcement that will allow safety for both the responder and the veteran, and does not breach confidentiality.
- Hire and include faith-based crisis responders with the current team of professionals.

The Crisis Hot Line has been widely publicized. It is imperative that we immediately make the Hot Line what is required to save lives and bring our veterans home: physically, mentally, psychologically and spiritually. We call on you to ensure that the needs of these veterans are met in the most timely manner.

Thank you for your service to the country and its veterans and for your consideration of reviewing our recommendations. We stand ready to assist in any way possible and look forward to your response.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bruce E. Parry". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping "B" and a cursive "Parry".

Bruce E. Parry, Ph.D.
CVO Chair
Bruce@CoalitionofVets.org
773-320-1859

cc: VA Inspector General
Illinois Congressional Delegation
National Commanders (Am Legion, VFW, VVA, IAVA, DAV)