

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-4804
May 7, 2019

COMMITTEES
APPROPRIATIONS
ARMED SERVICES
ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES
VETERANS' AFFAIRS

The Honorable Ajit Pai
Chairman
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street, SW
Washington, D.C 20554

The Honorable Robert Wilkie
Secretary
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Chairman Pai and Secretary Wilkie,

On average, one West Virginian dies by suicide every 24 hours. In a recent report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Mountain State has experienced a 37% increase in suicide deaths since 1999, and there is no group more impacted than military Veterans. It is our duty to honor their sacrifice by helping them in their time of need, and the implementation of a three-digit suicide hotline for Veterans is an important lifeline for many of those most at risk.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) estimates that more than 20 Veterans and military members die by suicide every single day across the United States. That means that the suicide rate among Veterans is nearly twice that of the general population. Just last week, three Veterans took their lives at VA facilities across the country in the span of five days. This is a national tragedy. These brave men and women who have fought for our country and risk their lives for our nation deserve nothing less than the very best we can offer.

The National Suicide Hotline Improvement Act of 2018 (P.L. 115-233), which was signed into law on August 18th, 2018, requires the Federal Communications Commission, in consultation with the Secretary of the Veterans Affairs, to complete a study on the effectiveness of an N11 dialing code for Veterans in crisis no later than August 2019. While this is an important step forward, I remain concerned about the lack of urgency around this issue. Getting our Veterans help in their time of need is literally a life and death issue.

On behalf of the Veterans and families across my great State of West Virginia who have lost friends and loved-ones to suicide, I strongly support the implementation of a three-digit suicide hotline for Veterans. As a member of the Senate Committee on Appropriations and the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, I want to ensure that your agencies have the resources and authority they need now and through the upcoming fiscal year to make this a reality. I respectfully request an update on the progress of the aforementioned feasibility study for establishing an N11 dialing code for Veterans in crisis, including a timeline for completion, and an overview of the outreach efforts conducted to date and planned in the future to ensure that a representative sample of Veterans, providers, and other relevant stakeholders have a voice in this process.

Since the launch of the VA Crisis Line for suicide prevention, crisis centers have received millions of calls from Veterans and many lives have been saved because of this critical service. However, countless Veterans remain unserved because they do not know who to call in their time of need. What are your agencies doing now to increase public awareness of the VA Crisis

Line and quantify the penetration rate among at-risk Veterans? What additional resources do you need in Fiscal year 2020 to maintain and augment those initiatives?

I look forward to your response to these critical questions and your ongoing help in making more resources available to the Veteran community. Thank you for your attention to this important matter and for your continued service to our nation's Veterans.

Sincerely,



Joe Manchin III