



COMMITTEE ON
ENERGY AND COMMERCE

- COMMUNICATIONS &
TECHNOLOGY
- HEALTH
- OVERSIGHT & INVESTIGATIONS

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

February 29, 2016

The Honorable Robert McDonald
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary McDonald:

I write to you today to focus your attention on concerns with the Veterans Crisis Line operated at the Canandaigua VA Medical Center. Serious issues have been raised by employees at the Center, as well as the VA Office of the Inspector General. I ask for expedience in implementing new processes that will ensure the mental health of our veterans never goes ignored.

The Canandaigua VA Medical Center – located in my district – has operated the Veterans Crisis Line since 2007. Since that time, the crisis line has answered millions of calls from our veterans at some of their darkest hours. As the primary hub, it is critical that the Canandaigua VA use best practices to ensure efficiency and thoroughness in the care of veterans. Unfortunately, I have recently learned of veteran phone calls going to voicemail and inadequate training for responders.

One of the more troubling issues with the Crisis Hotline was recently released in a VA Office of the Inspector General report titled, “Veterans Crisis Line Caller Response and Quality Assurance Concerns Canandaigua, New York.” This report found that unanswered calls routed to a backup center were sent to a voicemail system. Further, the report found that the voicemail system had not been checked because staff was unaware of its existence. The report also illustrated that there were inconsistencies in orientation and training checklists for new hires in FY2014 – further shedding doubt on the ability of responders to adequately address the needs of veterans calling in.

I also recently discussed multiple issues at the crisis center with past and current employees. These conversations included concerns about the call model used for all incoming calls and how calls are handled when a veteran isn’t calling about suicide. Other issues that were brought up in these conversations were the insufficient experience of management at the crisis center, and the lack of mental health programs available for employees.

In November of last year, you announced that you would be training VA employees in Lean Six Sigma. I welcomed this news. I have found those practices to be extremely successful in both the private and public sectors. Coming from the private sector, like you, I implemented this business model in all of my companies.

In 2007, I was elected Erie County Executive (New York) on the platform of smaller county government using Lean Six Sigma. I knew that in order to implement Lean Six Sigma on a large municipal scale, I had to hire a certified Master Black Belt as Director of Lean Six Sigma for Erie County. Under my leadership, Erie County pursued Lean Six Sigma training programs for hundreds employees. All employees underwent Change Management Training and had the opportunity to earn their Yellow, Green, and Black belts. Erie County was the first large county in the United States to be run using this business model.

I believe the implementation of Lean Six Sigma at the crisis center would have a tremendous impact. The crisis center is currently run using a top down approach that sometimes leaves workers afraid to come forward with concerns and ideas that would help save lives. The implementation of Lean Six Sigma would initiate a dialogue between workers by changing the center to a bottom up business model, which would boost morale and increase efficiency. The center uses a Civilian Call Model when taking calls from veterans, which is a largely scripted model. Veterans calling in with issues dealing with suicide, PTSD, depression, substance abuse, or other crises cannot be helped by someone reading off a script who cannot relate to their situation. Best practices would tell us to put veterans who have lived through these issues in the seats to answer these phone calls or allow them to train responders about PTSD and other issues plaguing veterans.

Implementing best practices through Lean Six Sigma will provide callers with the help they need, while decreasing the rate of suicides among our nation's veterans. One suicide a day is too many, more than twenty is absolutely unacceptable. We must do everything we can to protect and provide for the men and women who serve our nation.

Recently, I sent you a letter regarding issues at the Buffalo Outpatient Clinic detailed by the VA Office of the Inspector General. The Buffalo VA system as a whole has struggled in the past with unsanitary conditions and improper implementation of safety needle devices. I believe the application of Lean Six Sigma practices in clinics, hospitals, and call centers is the first step in solving the many problems plaguing the VA and will help our nation's veterans get the help they deserve in an efficient and effective manner.

I would like to extend an invitation for you to visit the Western New York VA facilities in Canandaigua and Buffalo to see first-hand how the business model you and I live by would help these facilities serve their true purpose. I have included with this letter a copy of "Efficient Government Through Lean Six Sigma," a white paper written by the University at Buffalo on my successes implementing Lean Six Sigma in a large municipal government. Should you have any questions or want to set up a meeting, please contact Erynn Hook in my D.C. office. I look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,


CHRIS COLLINS
Member of Congress