

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 28, 2017

The Honorable David J. Shulkin
Secretary
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary Shulkin,

We write today to bring an issue of concern to your attention. As you may know, a recent report by the VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) found numerous continuing issues at the Veterans Crisis Line (VCL). While we applaud the work that has been done to help fix ongoing issues at the VCL, it is clear that further steps need to be taken to address serious challenges.

The VA OIG's recent analysis of the VCL is startling. Chief among the findings is that the hotline has not responded adequately to veterans' calls. As the report found, "the failure to respond adequately to the veteran's urgent needs resulted in missed opportunities to provide crisis intervention services." This is simply unacceptable. In particular, the report showed that from April 2016 through November 2016, more than a quarter of calls directed to the VCL were forwarded to backup call centers that lacked appropriate quality control measures.

The Veterans Crisis Line has been in operation since 2007, and provides around-the-clock crisis intervention services to veterans in need of assistance. The crisis hotline has proven to be a valuable tool for reaching at-risk veterans. The hotline has fielded more than 2.5 million calls, of which over 60,000 have been forwarded to emergency personnel for immediate action. With a recent VA study finding that 20 veterans commit suicide each day, it is more important than ever that the VCL be fully functional and that its reach continues to broaden.

The report makes clear that continued issues at the VCL stem from structural deficiencies in oversight by executive leadership and a lack of effective incoming telephone call management. The report states that in 2015, the hotline was without a permanent director for 10 months and that as of December 2016, there was still no permanent director of the VCL. A lack of cohesive leadership has clearly prevented the hotline from implementing meaningful reforms.

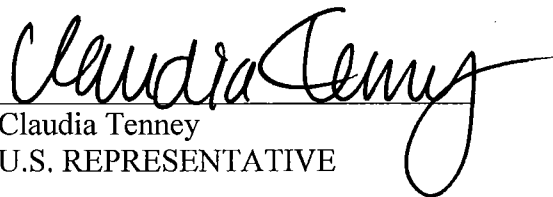
In 2016, the Veterans Health Administration Member Services acquired oversight of the VCL. The report affirms initial concerns that Member Services may be better suited to overseeing administrative responsibilities than clinical ones. As evidence of this, the report notes that VCL management has too often sought to determine the success of the program by measuring quantity of calls rather than quality. Based on the findings of the report, we believe that the VA Office of Mental Health, which is better suited to handle clinical mental health needs, should play a more significant role in overseeing the program and monitoring key clinical outcomes.

The lack of sufficient training for responders at the VCL is also an issue that has come up repeatedly. This report solidifies concerns that responders do not receive adequate training. It further sheds light on the lack of emphasis on quality when the VA stood up the Atlanta call center. Training class sizes at Atlanta range from 44 people to 62 trainees as compared to Canandaigua's class size of 20. Even more disheartening, the ratio of preceptors to responders at the Atlanta facility is 1:16 as compared to 1:1 at Canandaigua. We understand the serious need for more responders at the VCL but all responders need to receive proper and uniform training. It is unacceptable to rush responders through a program that is crucial to saving veterans lives.


In light of the OIG findings, we respectfully request that you provide us with information on how the VA intends to correct the many deficiencies identified by this most recent report. Further, we would like to know when a permanent director will be assigned to the VCL. Given the high volume of calls fielded by the hotline, we understand that it faces certain logistical and operational challenges. However, these challenges must be overcome and we stand ready to provide the necessary resources and support.

We look forward to your response and thank you for your enduring commitment to serving our veterans. Please know that we are eager to work with you in the years ahead to provide the best care possible for all of our returning heroes.

Sincerely,



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U.S. REPRESENTATIVE



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Denny Heck
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Mike Coffman
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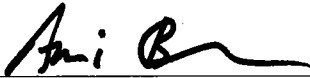
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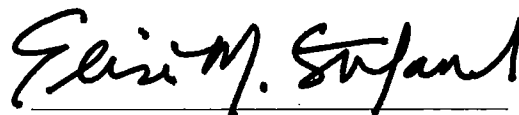
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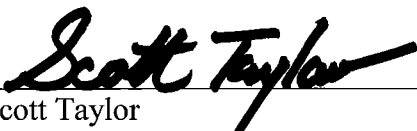
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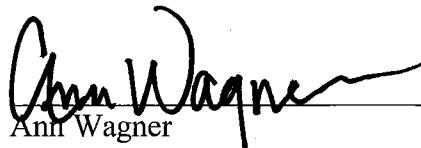
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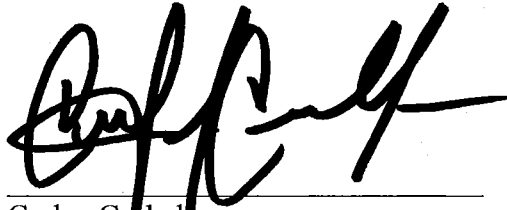
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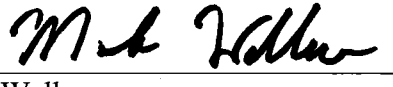


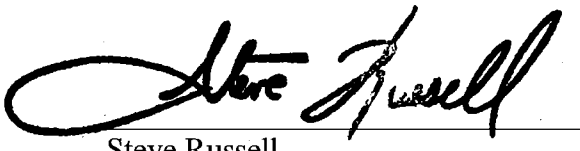
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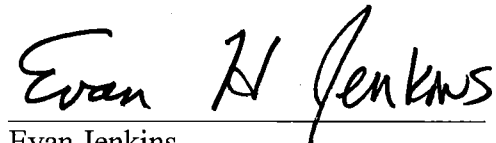

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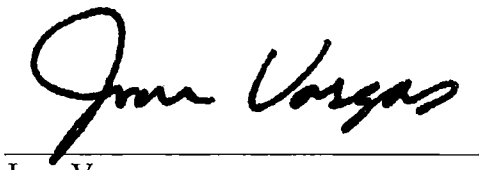

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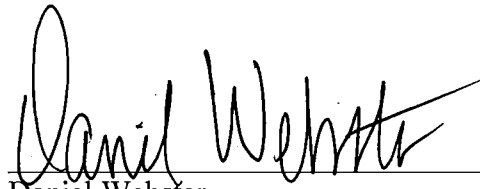
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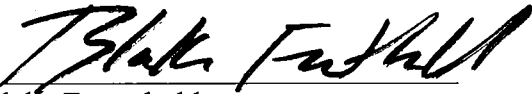
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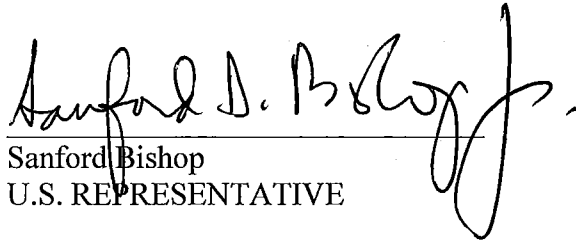
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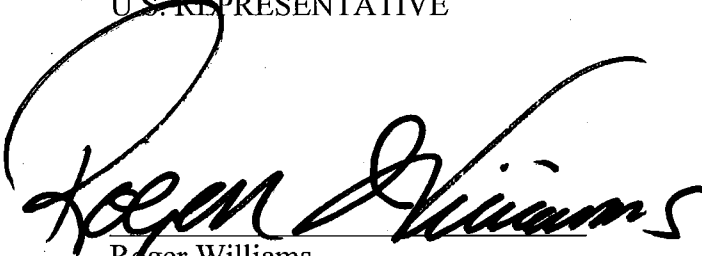
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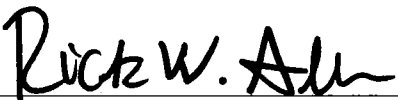
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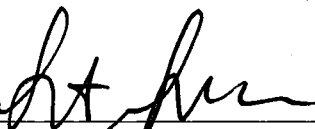
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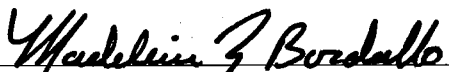
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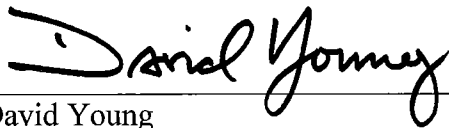
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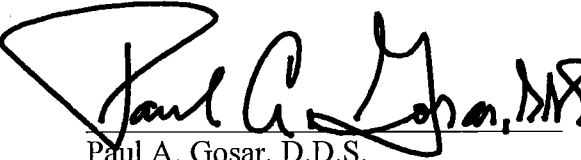

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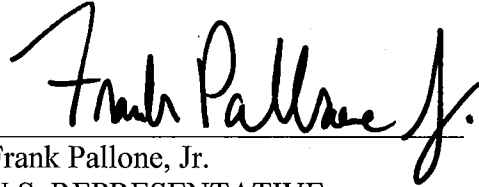
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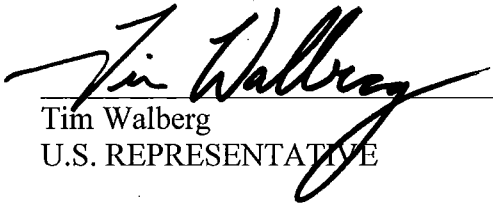
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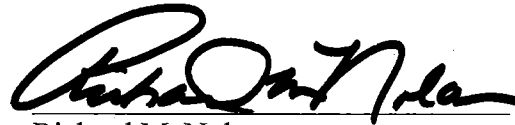
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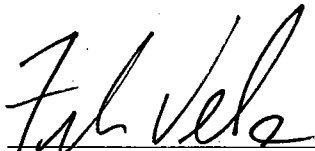
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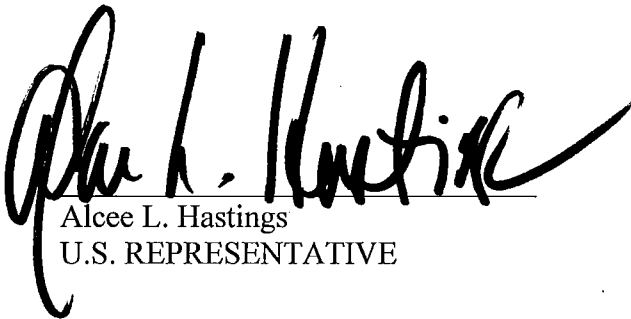
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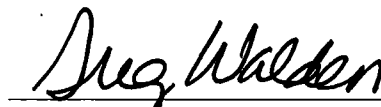
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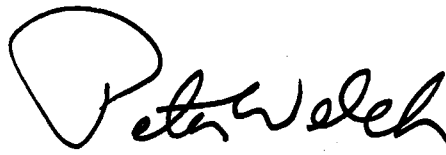
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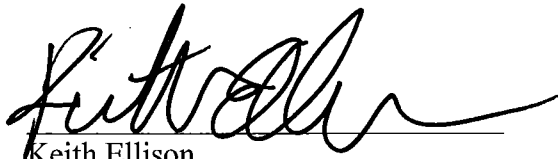
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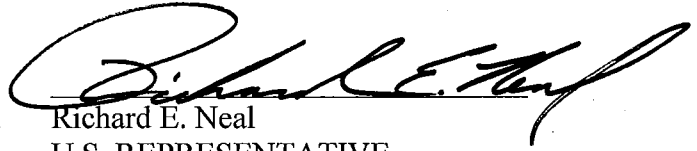
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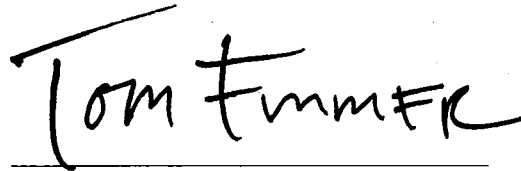
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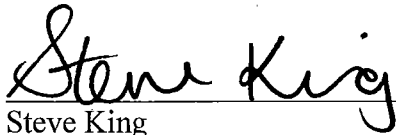
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