

Progress on Veterans Crisis Line improvements already underway

The VA Office of Inspector General's February 11, 2016 report on the Veteran's Crisis Line reflects issues found there as of the end of December 2014. It is important for Veterans and our key stakeholders to know that VA undertook actions to strengthen Veterans Crisis Line operations long before publication of the inspector general report. The goal is to make the Veterans Crisis Line nothing short of a world class crisis response center.

Before outlining these actions, I want to reiterate that the Veterans Crisis Line in Canandaigua is staffed by committed, hard-working employees — many of them Veterans — that save Veteran lives every day. Our work is focused on providing these committed employees the right tools and capacity to save those Veterans. Since the crisis line began operations in 2007, our crisis line responders have saved 53,000 Veterans. I am extraordinarily proud of their service and what they do for Veterans.

Since the crisis line began operations in 2007, our crisis line responders have saved 53,000 Veterans.

Getting this right is a top priority. We need to be able to help Veterans when they are most vulnerable, when they are in crisis. Our commitment is that by the end of this year, every Veteran in crisis will have their call promptly answered by an experienced responder at the Veterans Crisis Line.

Months ago, we launched a comprehensive plan to strengthen the Veterans Crisis Line.

Since last year the VCL has:

- Strengthened leadership by hiring a director with a clinical social work background, a deputy director of business operations with call center management experience, four dedicated staff trainers and six dedicated quality managers.
- Improved management work flow data that resulted in providing the most responders at the times when Veterans are most in crisis.
- Strengthened staff training for all frontline staff involved in crisis response by implementing comprehensive multi-week training programs for all front line crisis line responders, publishing a new employee handbook and implementing a new training data base.
- Strengthened quality assurance by implementing silent monitors at the Crisis Line.
- Invested in new technology improvements to include key upgrades to phone systems and equipment to better handle the increased demand at the crisis line, which has seen growth in annual calls from 67,000 in 2008 to 534,000 in 2015.
- Expanded and improved capacity by renovating 40 percent of operational work area that resulted in the addition of 45 responder workstations.

These improvements are increasing our capacity to speak with the Veterans that need us most.

Other improvements underway include:

- Hiring 68 more crisis line responders.

- Strengthening third party contracting management while increasing internal capacity to handle incoming calls.
- Continued acquisition over the next several months of state-of-the art technology for phone systems and necessary internal tools.
- Continued improvement in work processes to ensure trained VA crisis responders are available to support Veterans that are calling in crisis.

The employees at the Veteran Crisis Line save lives every day. Of all the Veterans we serve, a Veteran in crisis must know that dedicated, expert VA staff will be there when needed. That is the sacred obligation that prompted the work begun months ago to strengthen and expand the Veteran's Crisis Line. We will continue that work until the Veteran's Crisis Line is the world class crisis response center Veterans deserve.