

ANTONIO DELGADO
19TH DISTRICT, NEW YORK

1007 LONGWORTH HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515
(202) 225-5614

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-3219

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The Honorable Antonio Delgado (NY-19)
Testimony before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Health
October 13, 2021

Thank you, Chairwoman Brownley and Ranking Member Bergman, for giving me the opportunity to speak in support of my bipartisan bill, the REACH for Veterans Act.

In August, I held a powerful veterans forum in New York's 19th Congressional District. We heard from veterans, local leaders, and advocates who all stressed the same point—veterans, especially those who have served after 9/11, are struggling. Studies estimate that over 30,000 post-9/11 veterans have died by suicide—more than four times the number of service members who gave their lives during military operations. We must do everything in our power to be there for the brave men and women who served in uniform and protected our freedom.

My bill, the bipartisan REACH for Veterans Act, would institute several critically important improvements to the Veterans Crisis Line (VCL). The VCL has answered more than 5.6 million calls since it was established in 2007, and dispatched emergency services to more than 204,000 callers in crisis. It is essential, and it has saved lives. However, a series of reports recently published by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Office of Inspector General highlighted serious shortcomings in the VCL's training for call responders, and in the VA's management of the hotline.

Our legislation implements the suggested reforms outlined in those reports. Our bill would:

- Require an outside evaluation of VCL's current training curriculum.
- Direct the VA to issue re-training guidance for call responders.
- Increase the quality review and management over VCL calls and processes
- Improve responder guidance for high-risk callers; and
- Establish pilot programs to improve VCL services

The bill would also facilitate the VCL's transition to 9-8-8 as part of the national suicide prevention hotline, making it easier for veterans to find help when they need it most.

I'm honored to say that my bill is endorsed by many of our nation's most prominent VSOs, including the American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, Paralyzed Veterans of America, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the Wounded Warrior

Project. These VSOs, who do the work on the ground day in and day out to support American veterans of all eras, know what an important role the VCL plays.

As a nation, we are forever indebted to the brave men and women who serve our nation in uniform. It is our solemn obligation—as elected officials and as Americans—to care for our veterans when they return home, whether their wounds are visible or not. When our nation’s veterans find themselves in a moment of crisis, it is essential that they have the resources they need. I urge the committee to join me in supporting this critical legislation.

Thank you, Representatives Tracey Mann, Mikie Sherrill, and Mariannette Miller-Meeks for leading this bill with me in the House and Chairman Tester and Ranking Member Moran for their work on this legislation in the Senate.

I am happy to answer any questions, and I yield back the balance of my time.