

**United States Senate**  
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 4, 2024

The Honorable Shereef Elnahal  
Under Secretary for Health  
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Ave., NW  
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Under Secretary Elnahal,

We write today to draw your attention to disturbing recent trends in women veterans' suicide rates and to urge the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to take swift, concrete steps to tackle this issue head on. Striking recent data and devastating stories from across the country make clear that our government must act to better meet the needs of women veterans – especially when it comes to better tailoring VA's resources and programming to enable safe firearm storage, improve lethal means safety counseling, and prevent suicide.

We all know that women veterans face challenges distinct from those experienced by the broader population. For far too long these stressors have gone unaddressed and appear to be contributing to a startling uptick in suicides. VA's 2023 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report drives home the scale of this problem: from 2020 to 2021, women veterans' suicide rate jumped by 24.1%, four times the 6.3% increase among male veterans, and far above the 2.6% increase among nonveteran women. Women veterans' suicide rate in 2021 was a shocking 166.1% higher than that of non-veteran women. In addition, the rate of women veterans dying by firearm suicide was found to be nearly three times higher than that of non-veteran women, with firearms used in 51.7% of cases.<sup>1</sup>

This data speaks to the serious and mounting threat to the mental health and wellbeing of the women who have served in our armed forces. These numbers emphasize the need for VA to ensure it is doing everything possible to address this glaring problem and to meet the needs of women veterans intentionally, especially through its suicide prevention programming.

We recognize your work to improve VA's efforts to prevent suicide and better support at-risk veterans across our communities. We appreciate that VA has tried to help ensure veterans know that the 988 Suicide and Crisis Hotline exists and is available to them. We also know that VA has worked in recent years to implement new laws aimed at better supporting survivors of military sexual trauma (MST), which has been tied to increased suicide risk.<sup>2</sup> Still, we feel strongly that VA can and must quickly take additional action to turn the tide on these recent terrible trends that show women veterans to be uniquely at risk and without sufficient support.

Specifically, we believe that VA needs to reexamine its lethal means safety programming with a closer eye to the experiences and needs of women veterans. About 38% of women veterans own a firearm, and they are three times as likely as non-veteran women to die by firearm suicide.<sup>3</sup> These statistics highlight the pressing need to draw more attention to and counteract the risk of

firearm suicide by women veterans. There needs to be a more proactive and productive conversation about the deadly outcomes that too often arise among this population when dark moments coincide with ready access to firearms.

For this conversation to progress, VA must develop a better understanding of women veterans, the troubles they face, their views of firearms, and the best methods of supporting them. There is evidence that during the pandemic more women veterans began expressing safety concerns and gravitating towards firearm ownership as a means of protecting themselves and their families.<sup>4</sup> We fear that VA, and our country broadly, has not done enough to fully understand women veterans' views of firearm ownership and personal safety, as well as any trauma that has informed those views. VA must lead in conducting the research that can inform the reform needed to make its suicide prevention and lethal means safety counseling programs more impactful in reaching women veterans.

When over half of suicides take place within ten minutes of the suicidal urge, we must do all we can to ensure that VA's public service campaigns, lethal means safety counseling, and safe storage programs are as effective – and as well-tailored to women veterans – as possible, to place a barrier of time and space between the thought of suicide and action. Unfortunately, studies have indicated that VA's universal suicide prevention campaigns have not been as effective as they could be in drawing the connection between suicide and access to firearms. Viewers have also reported that campaigns lack a call to action that is clear and well-tailored to the audience.<sup>5</sup>

It's past time for the VA to take a close look at its suicide prevention efforts and to work to ensure that its programs meet women veterans where they are. Continuing to partner with veterans service organizations, veteran leaders, and other relevant groups, VA must refine its messaging, carefully select its messengers, and fine-tune its programming to ensure that VA suicide prevention and lethal means safety programs effectively reach their audiences and support them in taking life-saving firearm safety precautions.

As outlined in the Women Veterans report published by Disabled American Veterans in February 2024, VA has clear steps it can and should take to better tailor its suicide prevention programs to women.<sup>6</sup> These include:

- Collaborating with all relevant VA offices, experts, and outside groups to study and better understand women veterans' perception of suicide prevention and lethal means counseling and to determine what actions are most effective;
- Conducting focus groups to determine the best secure firearm storage messages and messengers to get through to women veterans;
- Considering partnership with VSOs, healthcare organizations, and other partners to stand up a national firearm suicide prevention program with greater appeal and reach; and
- Taking lessons learned from this research and implementing them across the VA, including in its training of employees and better tailoring of programs to support the specific needs of women veterans.

With the pressing need to stop women veteran suicides, we request that VA provide to our offices updates on its consideration of the steps outlined above, no later than 21 days from today. We are keen to learn the exact steps VA is planning and the ways that Congress might help bolster its efforts to better support women veterans in our communities and across the country.

We look forward to your response and working together with you to better meet the needs of our nation's women veterans. Thank you for your attention to this important issue.

Sincerely,



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Christopher S. Murphy  
United States Senator



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Lisa Murkowski  
United States Senator

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<sup>1</sup> “2023 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report,” U.S Department of Veterans Affairs, November 2023, <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2023/2023-National-Veteran-Suicide-Prevention-Annual-Report-FINAL-508.pdf>, page 17.

<sup>2</sup> “Women Veterans,” VA Suicide Prevention Annual Report, U.S Department of Veterans Affairs, November 2023, <https://department.va.gov/suicide-prevention-annual-report/women-veterans/>.

<sup>3</sup> “Women Veterans: The Journey to Mental Wellness,” Disabled American Veterans, 2024, <https://www.dav.org/wp-content/uploads/Women-Veterans-Study-2024.pdf>, page 8.

<sup>4</sup> “Women Veterans: The Journey to Mental Wellness,” Disabled American Veterans, 2024, <https://www.dav.org/wp-content/uploads/Women-Veterans-Study-2024.pdf>, page 8.

<sup>5</sup> “Women Veterans: The Journey to Mental Wellness,” Disabled American Veterans, 2024, <https://www.dav.org/wp-content/uploads/Women-Veterans-Study-2024.pdf>, page 10-11.

<sup>6</sup> “Women Veterans: The Journey to Mental Wellness,” Disabled American Veterans, 2024, <https://www.dav.org/wp-content/uploads/Women-Veterans-Study-2024.pdf>, page 11.