

April 21, 2021

The Honorable Mark Takano
Chairman
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Jon Tester
Chairman
U.S. Senate
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mike Bost
Ranking Member
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Jerry Moran
Ranking Member
U.S. Senate
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Takano, Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Bost, and Ranking Member Moran:

Suicide is a public health crisis in the United States and has remained the 10th leading cause of death over the last decade. Sadly, we know our nation's veterans are at higher risk compared to their civilian counterparts, and are also more likely to use the most lethal suicide attempt method, firearms. Due to the intersection of firearms and suicide among the veteran population, we implore you to prioritize the Lethal Means Training Act as part of Congress's ongoing efforts to prevent veteran suicide.

It is estimated nearly half of all veterans own at least one firearm¹ and one in three veterans who own firearms report storing at least one loaded and unlocked.² Firearms are an important part of military culture, but if we want to meaningfully prevent suicides, they cannot be ignored for suicide prevention efforts. Every year more than 6,000 veterans die by suicide -- 17 every single day. Of those 17 deaths, an estimated 12 are by firearm. Firearms are the most common suicide method among veterans, used in 69% of male veteran suicides and 42% of female veteran suicides. For suicide attempts, the means matter: firearms are the most lethal method of suicide attempt, with 9 out of 10 firearm suicide attempts resulting in death.

Lethal means safety has been shown to be an effective suicide prevention strategy, and even has been noted to have more potential for reducing suicides than traditional clinical interventions. Temporarily reducing access to firearms from individuals during or in anticipation of a suicidal crisis makes it more likely they will survive a suicide attempt. Though a person may consider suicide for a long time (providing opportunities for intervention and risk reduction), suicidal

¹ Cleveland EC, Azrael D, Simonetti JA, Miller M. (2015). [Firearm ownership among American veterans: Findings from the 2015 National Firearm Survey](#). *Inj Epidemiol*.

² Simonetti JA, Azrael D, Rowhani-Rahbar A, Miller M. (2018). [Firearm storage practices among American veterans](#). *Am J Prev Med*.

crises peak relatively quickly for many people. Access to firearms during that high-risk time period is a key factor in whether or not a person will survive. Though research shows that few individuals substitute means for suicide if their preferred method is not available, if firearms are not available, the person at risk for suicide is much more likely to survive even if they attempt using another method.

We are thankful to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for acknowledging that in order to meaningfully prevent suicide among veterans, addressing access to firearms must be part of the comprehensive suicide prevention plan and for including “Lethal Means Safety” as a strategy to reduce suicides in the recent 2020 Annual Report. We commend these efforts, though we know more is needed to curb the suicide epidemic.

The Lethal Means Training Act is one legislative path to improve suicide prevention efforts. Lethal means safety counseling is an effective healthcare intervention that prevents suicide by helping patients and families reduce access to firearms, or other lethal means, for those at risk. Lethal means safety counseling is the process that healthcare providers undertake to determine if a person at risk of suicide has access to lethal means and subsequently work with the patient and their family or friends to reduce access to firearms until the risk subsides. This allows healthcare providers to work respectfully and in partnership with patients to find mutually-agreeable solutions that temporarily reduce access to guns and in turn, reduce their risk of suicide.

The Coalition to Stop Gun Violence supports evidence-based recommendations developed by the Consortium for Risk-Based Firearm Policy to train all healthcare professionals in lethal means safety counseling.³ This is particularly important for veterans, as the majority of veterans don’t use Veteran Health Administration (VHA) services and the majority of veteran suicide decedents did not recently receive VHA services prior to their death. While the VA is working to expand lethal means counseling, it is imperative that they promote this practice outside of the VHA as well, including by providing in-depth training for Community Care Network providers and others who routinely interact with veterans.

Suicide is preventable and reducing access to firearms while veterans are at risk will save lives. The VA recognizes how important this is to meaningfully prevent suicide among the people who serve and have served our country. Important suicide prevention efforts, including interventions focused on firearms, are underway within the agency, but these efforts must continue to grow in order to stem the suicide epidemic and the disproportionate burden of firearm suicide on veterans. Respectfully addressing access to firearms is a key component of suicide prevention, particularly among veterans. Providing training on lethal means safety counseling to all professionals who routinely interact with veterans via the Lethal Means Training Act must be part of a comprehensive suicide prevention strategy.

³ Allchin A & Chaplin V, on behalf of the Consortium for Risk-Based Firearm Policy. (2017). [Breaking Through Barriers: The Emerging Role of Healthcare Provider Training Programs in Firearm Suicide Prevention](#).

Sincerely,

Vicka Chaplin

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Coalition to Stop Gun Violence