

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

May 20, 2015

The Honorable Ashton B. Carter  
Secretary  
United States Department of Defense  
1000 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, D.C. 20301-1400

Dear Secretary Carter,

We write to inquire about the decision to terminate funding for the successful Vets4Warriors program, operated by Rutgers University Behavioral Health Care, without public notice. The Pentagon-funded call center located in Piscataway, New Jersey, has provided invaluable and ongoing peer-support to military service members and their families struggling with a variety of psychological and emotional challenges, thereby ensuring that they get the support they desperately need.

As you know, there has been a troubling increase in active-duty military suicides after 9/11, eventually hitting a peak of 319 in 2012. Since the start of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, more than 3,000 active-duty personnel, along with hundreds of Reserve and National Guard personnel, have taken their own lives. The Vets4Warriors program has provided valuable assistance to reduce these incidents by helping callers create a plan to overcome adversity, manage stress, and build resilience. Since 2010, service members have been able to find confidential assistance from peers who share lived experiences and who can quickly connect and listen in highly effective ways. The support created by this program has been in high demand—since December 2011, the Vets4Warriors program has had over 130,000 contacts with service members and their families. In just five years, thousands of individuals have received critical care and assistance.

We were encouraged by the Department of Defense's past support of this program. Marine Sergeant Major Bryan Battaglia visited Vets4Warriors in January of this year to hear from operators about their experiences fielding help-line calls. In 2013, Major General Jessica Wrightwhile serve as Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, expressed support for Vets4Warriors when she stated, "the peer support offered by Vets4Warriors is a great benefit to the total force," and that she was "impressed with the peer counselors' commitment, and as veterans themselves, they understand and can really connect with callers."

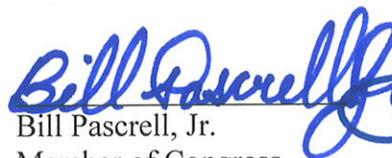
Vets4Warriors is unique because it provides military service members and their families with a safe place to seek help that is outside of DoD, which is critical because we know that many service members are reluctant to contact superiors for assistance with mental health needs. We are concerned that by integrating these efforts into the Defense Department's Military

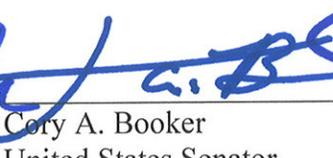
OneSource program, the trust in the confidential assistance provided by an organization like Vets4Warriors will be lost. Decreasing the number of options available to our service members struggling with mental health concerns seems irresponsible and an unconscionable shirking of our responsibility to service members and their families.

Finally, this move will result in the layoff of approximately 40 well-trained, talented veterans who have been diligently providing Vets4Warriors support services around the clock.

We request that the Department of Defense provide our offices with a detailed explanation and analysis of the decision to suspend funding for the Vets4Warriors program without public notice. We strongly urge you to reconsider this decision, or at the very least, ensure that there is a public process to determine Vets4Warriors's effectiveness prior to closure of the program. Finally, we stand ready to work with you to ensure our troops receive the best mental health resources.

Sincerely,

  
Bill Pascrell, Jr.  
Member of Congress

  
Cory A. Booker  
United States Senator

  
Robert Menendez  
United States Senator

  
Frank A. LoBiondo  
Member of Congress

  
Frank Pallone, Jr.  
Member of Congress

  
Tom MacArthur  
Member of Congress

cc: Dr. Keita M. Franklin, Director of the Defense Suicide Prevention Office, U/S Brad Carson