

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 28, 2021

Secretary Denis R. McDonough
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough:

We write to raise our ongoing concern about veteran suicide and the hardships faced by surviving family members in the aftermath of such tragedies. We support the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) prioritizing this issue, and strongly support its efforts to build community- and clinically-based partnerships across the country to decrease veteran suicides.

One area of particular concern is the process by which families apply for VA support following the loss of their veteran family member to suicide. Beyond the VA's continued support of prevention, intervention, and postvention public health measures to address veteran suicides, we urge the department to ensure beneficiary benefits are easy to access and VA personnel are responsive to all families during this critical time.

Veteran advocates in Colorado often tell us that the VA process to demonstrate the service connection of a loved one's suicide is extremely difficult and emotionally taxing. We also hear from veterans and their families that the burden of proof of eligibility is too high. These families are already burdened by the loss of a loved one and should not struggle to claim the benefits they deserve.

We request that the Department of Veterans Affairs provide data outlining the rate at which (1) families who lose a veteran family member to suicide seek benefits; and (2) such claims are denied. In the event that such data is not available, we strongly suggest targeted data collection to more accurately ascertain the scope of this problem. Furthermore, we ask that you consider process improvements to increase the accessibility of this application to better meet the needs of all veteran families who find themselves in this situation.

We look forward to your reply on this issue and welcome the opportunity to collaborate with you on this and other matters important to our veterans and their families.

Sincerely,



Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator



John Hickenlooper
United States Senator