

VA programs called out for missing the mark

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FARGO, N.D. (Valley News Live, CNN): It's called the Veterans Crisis Line, and it's a number veterans can call or text during a mental health emergency. But a new report says the agency is not answering all of those pleas for help. Cass County is home to over 10,000 veterans too.

The Veterans Crisis Line is supposed to help those defending our freedoms. But a new report out says the VA is falling far short of what they're promising. The agency is supposed to answer at least 90% of their calls within 30 seconds. The report found they only answered 65-75%. Also part of this, vets can send text messages. The report's findings? 28% of text messages just went simply unanswered.

"The issue that I have with it that makes it frustrating is when phone calls go unanswered, texts go unanswered. Pretty sure there's a lonely vet sitting at a computer trying to chat with somebody because he's got issues and he's not getting any answers. So that part is frustrating," expressed Dan Thorstad

Thorstad serves as the Veterans Service Officer for Cass County. He said it is encouraging the VA is trying to connect to a generation of vets who are much more plugged in.

"Giving them those options is a great idea, they just have to get better at it," said Thorstad.

He adds that it's great there is so much focus on mental health issues for vets. But the stigma surrounding combat issues, like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, still haunts many.

"They want you to get help but on the flip side it's going to affect your career so they carry that stigma into the civilian realm when they get out of the service," Thorstad said.

He says it's going to take people getting educated about mental health before real change will happen.

Another report from the VA Inspector General, an independent investigative agency under the VA structure, found tens of millions of dollars were wrongfully paid out to veterans in jail.

Federal law requires a reduction in compensation and pension benefits payments for vets behind bars for more than 60 days at any federal, state or local facility. The report found this did not happen. From May 2008 through June 2015, 53% of federal cases did not see a reduction, meaning nearly \$60 million was doled out. From March 2013 through August 2014, at the state and local level, 18% of cases were not reduced and over \$44 million was paid out.

A report released on June 30th from the Commission on Care, a group tasked by Congress with fixing the VA found "many profound deficiencies." According to CNN, the report says the billions of dollars funneled into the VA since the waitlist scandal several years ago have not fixed many of the problems. And in fact, the report points out many 'improvements' that have actually made things worse. That includes "inadequate facilities, antiquated IT systems and inefficient use of employees". The much-maligned VA Choice Program, which Valley News Live has been investigating for months now, is also blasted, with the report saying the program "aggravated wait times and frustrated veterans" because of how confusing it is for eligibility and coordination with health care providers.