

United States Senate

July 14, 2015

The Honorable Robert McDonald
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonald,

I write to express concerns about the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) failure to implement key elements of the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act, which Congress passed unanimously earlier this year. Specifically, I am concerned that the VA has not established, as required under the law, community outreach pilot programs to assist veterans transitioning from active duty to civilian life and to improve veterans' access to mental health services.

Tragically, about 22 veterans commit suicide each day. According to the VA's own statistics, the number of suicide deaths of veterans increased by almost 11 percent from 2007 to 2010. With that in mind, the Clay Hunt Act was enacted to, among other things, create a three-year pilot program within at least five Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISNs) to assist veterans transitioning from active duty and to improve veterans' access to mental health services. The law clearly states that the VA must create a community-oriented veteran peer support network, carried out in partnership with an appropriate entity with experience. Yet, five months after the law was signed, I understand that not a single pilot program has been implemented in the nation.

Time is critical. The Army will soon reduce its end-strength by another 40,000 soldiers, and those soldiers and their families will return to their states needing immediate assistance from strong community-oriented peer support networks. I am confident you would agree that additional delays in establishing this pilot program are simply unacceptable – soldiers' lives and the welfare of their families depend on getting strong community support in the local communities where they settle.

I respectfully request that you respond to the following requests for information regarding the VA's plans to leverage, and partner with, currently existing organizations to provide veterans with vitally-needed mental health services as required under the Clay Hunt Act.

1. Delineate the VA's plan of action and associated milestones to create these pilot programs required under law.
2. Describe impediments that may exist, if any, to creating these programs and how the VA intends to overcome those impediments.

3. Describe how the VA intends to leverage, and partner with, existing organizations to provide the mental health services required under this law and its strategic plan for doing so.

Thank you for your timely response to these questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "John McCain", is positioned above the printed name and title.

John McCain
United States Senator