

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 8, 2012

Lieutenant General William E. Ingram, Jr.
Director, Army National Guard
1411 Jefferson Davis Highway
Arlington VA 22202-3231

Honorable Erin Conaton
Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness
4000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-4000

Dear Lieutenant General Ingram and Under Secretary Conaton:

I am writing to bring your attention to the Vets4Warriors helpline and respectfully request you work to locate funds to continue the operation of this critical service past September 2012.

The Vets4Warrior helpline is a peer-to-peer program based on a program in New Jersey with a proven track record of helping service members, veterans, and their families. A critical element of this program is an anonymous, veteran-operated "helpline" available to service members and their families. The helpline is answered in-person by veterans who are trained, paid employees and can provide support for a range of problems. There is no limit to how many times a caller can contact the helpline, and the peer counselors will make follow-up calls to callers until all issues are resolved.

I was pleased the National Guard Bureau and the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs recognized the success of this program and launched the Vets4Warriors helpline nationally to serve all National Guardsmen and Reservists in December 2011. Since this program was launched, veteran counselors at this national peer-to-peer helpline have fielded thousands of calls from service members. These calls have come from 52 states and territories and approximately 50 percent of callers have been veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In several emergency cases, counselors have had to notify the National Veterans Crisis Line and/or local emergency responders, who were able to locate the callers before it was too late to help.

It is critical that this program continues to receive the funding and support to maintain this important outlet for service members and veterans. As I understand, this program was funded for one year through FY 2012. On August 2, 2012, the Senate Appropriations Committee approved the FY 2013 Defense Appropriations bill, which included \$20 million for "Beyond Yellow Ribbon Programs." The bill clearly expresses congressional support for the Vets4Warrior helpline by directing the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program Office at the

Defense Human Resources Activity to continue funding a military peer-to-peer hotline for the National Guard and Reserves utilizing a portion of this \$20 million. With the increasing likelihood that the government will be operating on a Continuing Resolution at the beginning of FY 2013, I strongly urge you to provide the Vets4Warriors program with the needed funding to ensure this critical program continues in operation past September 2012.

Ending the activities of the Vets4Warriors program would send the wrong message to our service members at a time when the rate of suicides and other mental health issues continues to increase. Innovative services with peer-to-peer support, such as the Vets4Warriors helpline, are vital to stemming the tide of mental health issues in our military. Any gap in the availability of Vets4Warriors' services could have serious repercussions for those service members who need the peer support that this program provides.

Once again, I respectfully urge you to work to continue funding the Vets4Warriors program after current funding runs out at the end of September 2012. Thank you for your consideration of this important request.

Sincerely,



Cc: Honorable Jessica L. Wright, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs
Director Sharon H. Cooper, Defense Human Resources Activity
Director Glen Welling, Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program Office, Defense Human Resource Activity