Obama administration blames suicide hotline workers for veteran deaths

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4 July 2016

The Obama administration's Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is attempting to blame suicide hotline workers for historically unprecedented levels of suicides among veterans of US war abroad.

Internal emails acquired by *USA Today* show VA officials claiming that veteran suicides are caused by "staff who spend very little time on the phone or engaged in assigned productive activity," according to former VA crisis line director Greg Hughes in a May 13 email. Hughes and other officials also blamed a labor agreement that prevents the government from unilaterally firing or disciplining workers.

Attempts by the American ruling class to blame poorly paid hotline workers for veteran suicides is a cynical attempt to paper over the real cause for veteran suicide: the destructive and brutal character of the imperialist wars in which veterans were sent to fight.

Twenty-two veterans kill themselves each day, one every 80 minutes. In no small part their psychological trauma is caused by having witnessed unspeakable crimes carried out by the American war machine against the populations of target countries.

According to conservative estimates from the VA itself, significant portions of returning soldiers suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including 31 percent of Vietnam veterans, 10 percent of First Gulf War veterans, 11 percent of Afghanistan veterans, and 20 percent of Iraq War veterans.

Veterans Affairs set up the suicide prevention hotline in 2007, as the Bush administration was carrying out its "surge" in the war in Iraq, pouring 30,000 additional troops into the war zone. The establishment of the token hotline took place amidst efforts to starve veterans of health and psychological care.

The VA has also operated a conspiracy to delay veterans' care by moving them to the bottom of waitlists in an attempt to cut costs. Even so, the hotline received over 500,000 calls in 2015 from suicidal veterans—an indication of the degree to which the permanent state of war has affected a broad section of the population.

USA Today and the corporate press have fallen in line with the VA's efforts to blame hotline workers. In a June 30 column, *USA Today* editorial board writes: "Suicide hotline workers are letting veterans down in the worst way." "An 'under-performing workforce' is always an issue. But it's especially problematic when the workers are helping veterans in crisis. … Some workers handle only a handful of calls per day and leave early …"

Aside from unsupported claims by VA officials, the emails expose the fact that the VA farms out a large proportion of its hotline responses to non-profits, with a significant number of calls routed to a network of 164 "back-up call centers." Now, VA officials report that call center workers are being closely monitored, and that new technology allows management to track the content of calls so that a worker can be punished more easily for not handling a sufficient number of suicide calls.

There are fewer jobs more psychologically grueling than suicide hotline prevention networks, and attempts by the VA to enforce a "speed up" will result not only a hostile work environment for employees, but possibly incentivize workers to speed up calls with troubled veterans.

After 25 years of permanent war, tragic stories of veteran suicide are commonplace. On March 19, 51-year-old veteran Charles R. Ingram III lit himself on fire 75 feet in front of a VA facility in Atlantic City, New Jersey, leaving behind a wife and two young children. Ingram served as a sailor during the First Gulf

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War.

In 2012, US Army Maj. Gen. Dana Pittard expressed the callousness with which the American ruling class views the suicide crisis facing veterans:

"I have now come to the conclusion that suicide is an absolutely selfish act. … I am personally fed up with soldiers who are choosing to take their own lives so that others can clean up their mess. Be an adult, act like an adult, and deal with your real-life problems like the rest of us."

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