

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-373](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

VA established the VCL in July 2007 to provide support to veterans in emotional crisis. Between fiscal years 2008, its first full year of operation, and 2015, the number of calls received by the VCL increased almost 700 percent, exceeding VA's expectations. As VA began to address increasing numbers of requests for assistance, reports of dissatisfaction with VCL's service periodically appeared in the media.

GAO was asked to review VA's administration of the VCL. This report, among other issues, examines (1) the extent to which VA meets response-time goals for VCL calls and text messages, (2) how VA monitors VCL primary center call center operations, and (3) how VA works with VCL service partners to help ensure veterans receive high-quality service. GAO visited the VCL's primary center and two backup call centers; tested VCL response time through a generalizable sample of covert telephone calls and a nongeneralizable sample of text messages in July and August 2015; reviewed internal reports and policies and plans; and interviewed VA and SAMHSA officials.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that VA regularly test VCL's text messaging system and document targets and time frames for key performance indicators. GAO also recommends that VA and SAMHSA collect information on how often and why callers reach Lifeline when intending to reach the VCL, review this information, and, if necessary, develop plans to address the causes. VA and HHS concurred with GAO's recommendations and described planned actions to address them.

View [GAO-16-373](#). For more information, contact Seto J. Bagdoyan at (202) 512-6722 or [bagdoyans@gao.gov](mailto:bagdoyans@gao.gov) or Randall B. Williamson at (202) 512-7114 or [williamsonr@gao.gov](mailto:williamsonr@gao.gov).

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## VETERANS CRISIS LINE

### Additional Testing, Monitoring, and Information Needed to Ensure Better Quality Service

## What GAO Found

GAO found that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) did not meet its call response time goals for the Veterans Crisis Line (VCL), although extended call wait times were not common. VA's goal is to answer 90 percent of VCL calls at the VCL primary center within 30 seconds. Currently, calls not answered within 30 seconds route to VCL backup call centers; however, for 5 months of fiscal year 2015, calls were routed to VCL backup call centers after 60 seconds. VA officials told GAO that VA data show about 65 to 75 percent of VCL calls were answered at the VCL primary center in fiscal year 2015 within either 30 or 60 seconds. GAO's covert testing in July and August 2015 confirms VA's data. Specifically, 119 covert test calls show that an estimated 73 percent of calls made during this period were answered within 30 seconds. GAO also estimates that 99 percent of all VCL calls during this period were answered within 120 seconds. GAO also covertly tested the VCL's text messaging services and found that 4 of 14 GAO test text messages did not receive responses. VA officials said they do not monitor or test the timeliness and performance of the VCL text message system and instead rely solely on the VCL's text messaging provider for these functions. VA officials told GAO that the provider had not reported any issues with the system, but the provider told GAO that routine testing of the VCL system is not conducted. Without routinely testing its text messaging system or ensuring that its provider does so, VA cannot identify limitations to this service.

While VA has taken a number of steps to improve its monitoring of the VCL primary center operations, VA has not developed measurable targets and time frames for its key performance indicators, such as the program's percentage of abandoned calls. VA established a permanent VCL call center evaluation team and created a mechanism for tracking complaints about the performance of the VCL primary center from VCL callers or external parties. However, GAO found that VA has not specified quantifiable or otherwise measurable targets and has not included dates for when it would expect the VCL to complete actions covered by each key performance indicator. This is inconsistent with guidance provided by the Office of Management and Budget. As a result, VA cannot ensure that the VCL is providing consistent, high-quality services to callers and cannot effectively track and publicly report progress or results.

VA established an interagency agreement with its service partner, the Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), to manage the shared operations of the VCL and the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (Lifeline), which include a single national toll-free number used by both. Despite these efforts to coordinate, VA and SAMHSA do not collect information needed to assess how often and why callers intending to reach the VCL do not follow voice prompts and instead reach Lifeline local crisis centers. VA officials told GAO that the type of information that would be needed to do so is not collected because VA has focused on addressing the concerns of those callers who did reach the VCL. In addition, SAMHSA officials said that they do not require Lifeline local crisis centers to collect this type of information, noting that it would be possible to collect it. As a result, VA and SAMHSA do not know the extent to which this occurs and cannot determine the underlying causes that may need to be addressed.