

Vietnam Veterans of America
Chapter 788 Newsletter
February 2016



FEATURES

- ◆ *CALLS TO VA SUICIDE LINE GOT VOICEMAIL*
- ◆ *Blue Water Navy Veterans*
- ◆ *DREAMLAND...The True Tale of America's Opiate Epidemic*

"NEVER SHALL ONE GENERATION OF VETERANS ABANDON ANOTHER"

Toxic Exposure Research Legislation Is Needed for Veterans of every Generation

On February 10, Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Bob McDonald told Members of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs that no legislation on Agent Orange or Toxic exposures is needed. This statement by the DVA Secretary is in line with testimony, delivered before Congress on three occasions in the last eight months, in which the VA claims no research legislation is needed as other Agencies of the Federal Government are doing all of the research studies needed.

John Rowan, National President of Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) responded, "With all due respect to the Secretary, he could not be more wrong. Furthermore, we have yet to receive a list of these research studies referenced in VA testimony which purportedly pertain to veterans and their progeny."

"The events in the past week highlight the shameless wall of ignorance erected by the VA bureaucrats. Case in point is the Secretary's recent policy regarding the Blue Water Navy veterans of Vietnam. The policy states that a 'bright line' can be drawn across the mouth of a flowing river, with those on the inland side of that imaginary line being 'exposed,' and those two feet away, on the harbor side of the line, 'not exposed,' " said Rowan. "Those 'exposed' are eligible for presumptive service connection for certain conditions, and therefore medical care and compensation, while those who served two feet away are not. We are leaving our Navy veterans out in the cold, and sadly, many of them have died and their widows have been abandoned."



Lack of training, overload at backup crisis centers cited

A VA suicide hotline movingly portrayed in an Oscar-winning documentary has allowed crisis calls to go into voicemail and has struggled with adequate staff training, according to an inspector general investigation.

Inspectors found problems occurred when calls were routed to backup crisis centers after staff at the Department of Veterans Affairs suicide hotline center in Canandaigua, N.Y., (800-273-8255) were taking all the calls they could handle.

"We substantiated allegations that some calls routed to backup crisis centers were answered by voicemail, and callers did not always receive immediate assistance," said the VA Inspector General report made public late last week.

The VA, which has highlighted veteran suicides as a crucial area of concern, said that since the hotline was created in 2007, about 2 million calls have been answered and emergency efforts made to intervene and save lives in more than 53,000 cases.

An HBO documentary highlighting the life-and-death drama of the VA suicide hotline efforts won an Oscar last year.

The Inspector General report did not document how many calls are going to voicemail. But it said the number of calls going to backup crisis centers increased dramatically in recent years, from 36,261 in 2013 to 76,887 in 2014. About every sixth call goes to a backup center, the report said.

Investigators found 20 calls going to voicemail at one backup crisis center in 2014 where staff were apparently unaware there was a voicemail system, the report said.

In response to the findings, the VA concurred with all recommendations for taking steps to ensure calls no longer go to voicemail and that staff training be improved. Steps to increase staffing at the Canandaigua center were announced by the VA almost a year ago, said Victoria Dillon, department spokesperson.

A comprehensive training initiative is underway, and a quality assurance surveillance plan to monitor backup centers is being developed, she said.

"Systems are being reviewed and action plans have been developed to resolve the issues and address the OIG (Officer of Inspector General) recommendations," she said, adding that all improvements will be in place by September.

When the Canandaigua staff are busy taking calls, new phone calls are routed to one of six call-receiving crisis centers that are part of the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Association. The Inspector General found that staffers at these centers may not have the same level of training as the VA workers in Canandaigua.

Calls routed to the backup centers can be placed in a queue where they hear music for several minutes while they wait, the report said. The VA had no process for learning how long these people wait or how many of them finally hang up, the report said.

The 2014 documentary on the VA crisis hotline, "Crisis Hotline: Veterans Press 1" won the Oscar for best documentary, short subject.



“Blue Water” Navy Veterans

Montana's veterans deserve the best care our country can give them, but the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is failing them in their most basic responsibility.

Following a disappointing decision by the VA to not reverse a 2002 rule excluding "Blue Water" veterans from the VA benefits to which they should be entitled, Senator Gillibrand (D-NY) and I are calling on the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee to immediately take action and move forward our legislation that would provide a remedy to this injustice.

We're calling on the committee to pass our bill to ensure that "Blue Water" Navy veterans are made eligible for service-connected disability VA benefits and health care as a result of Agent Orange exposure during the Vietnam War.

It's far past time for our "Blue Water" veterans to get the benefits they deserve, but the situation at the VA is a bureaucratic nightmare. We owe it to Montana's vets and must prioritize their long-overdue benefits.

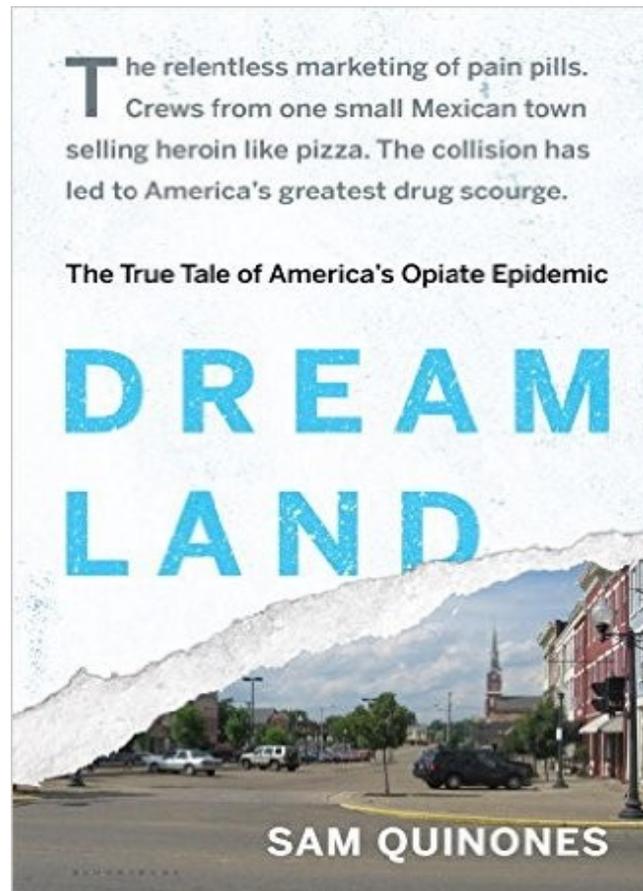
Congress must do what the VA has failed to do, and live up to the promises our government has made to our veterans. As Montana's voice in the U.S. Senate, I will continue fighting to ensure that our veterans get the care that they deserve.

As always, I encourage you to contact my office to express your concerns or opinions on policy issues important to you. And if we're not already connected on social media, I invite you to follow my daily updates on Facebook and Twitter.

It's my number one priority in Congress to represent the values and interests of the people of Montana, and your input is very helpful as I do. I also invite you to visit my website, www.daines.senate.gov, so we can stay in close touch.

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INTRODUCTION

Via pills, heroin had entered the mainstream.

The new addicts were football players and cheerleaders; football was almost a gateway to opiate addiction.

Wounded soldiers returned from Afghanistan hooked on pain pills and died in America.

Kids got hooked in college and died there.

Some of these addicts were from rough corners of rural Appalachia.

But many more were from the U.S. middle class. They lived in communities where the driveways were clean, the cars were new, and the shopping centers attracted congregations of Starbucks, Home Depot, CVS, and Applebee's.

They were the daughters of preachers, the sons of cops and doctors, the children of contractors and teachers and business owners and bankers.

And almost everyone was white.