

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-19-66](#), a report to the Ranking Member of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Veterans suffer a disproportionately higher rate of suicide than the civilian population. VA has estimated that an average of 20 veterans die by suicide per day, and in 2018, VA identified suicide prevention as its highest clinical priority. VHA's suicide prevention media outreach campaign—its collective suicide prevention outreach activities—helps raise awareness among veterans and others in the community about suicide prevention resources. VHA has contracted with an outside vendor to develop suicide prevention media outreach content.

GAO was asked to examine VHA's suicide prevention media outreach campaign. This report examines the extent to which VHA (1) conducts activities for its suicide prevention media outreach campaign, and (2) evaluates the effectiveness of its campaign. GAO reviewed relevant VHA documents and data on the amount, type, and cost of suicide prevention outreach activities since fiscal year 2013. GAO also reviewed VHA's contract for developing suicide prevention outreach content and interviewed VA and VHA officials.

What GAO Recommends

VHA should (1) establish an approach to oversee its suicide prevention media outreach campaign that includes clear delineation of roles and responsibilities, and (2) establish targets for its metrics to improve evaluation efforts. VA concurred with GAO's recommendations and described steps it will take to implement them.

View [GAO-19-66](#). For more information, contact Debra A. Draper at (202) 512-7114 or draperd@gao.gov.

November 2018

VA HEALTH CARE

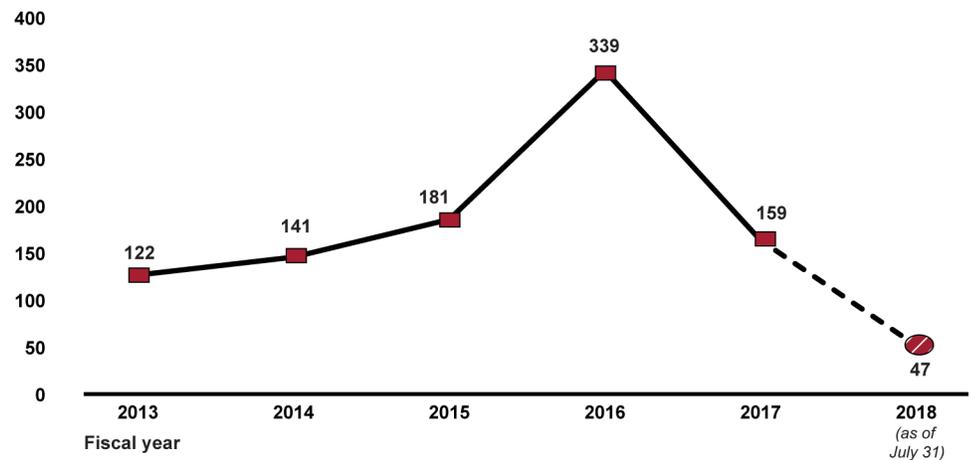
Improvements Needed in Suicide Prevention Media Outreach Campaign Oversight and Evaluation

What GAO Found

The Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Veterans Health Administration (VHA) conducts national suicide prevention media outreach on various platforms to raise awareness about VHA's suicide prevention resources. The primary focus of this campaign since 2010 has been to raise awareness of the Veterans Crisis Line (VCL), VHA's national hotline established in 2007 to provide support to veterans in emotional crisis. GAO found that VHA's suicide prevention media outreach activities declined in recent years due to leadership turnover and reorganization. For example, the amount of suicide prevention content developed by VHA's contractor for social media decreased in fiscal years 2017 and the first 10 months of 2018 after increasing in each of the 4 prior years.

Suicide Prevention Outreach Content for Social Media, since Fiscal Year 2013

Pieces of social media content developed



Source: Veterans Health Administration. | GAO-19-66

VHA officials reported not having leadership available for a period of time to make decisions about the suicide prevention media outreach campaign. GAO found that VHA did not assign key leadership responsibilities or establish clear lines of reporting, and as a result, its ability to oversee the outreach campaign was hindered. Consequently, VHA may not be maximizing its reach with suicide prevention media content to veterans, especially those who are at-risk.

VHA evaluates the effectiveness of its suicide prevention media outreach campaign by collecting data on metrics, such as the number of people that visit the VCL website. However, VHA has not established targets for the majority of these metrics. Officials said they have not established targets because, apart from one industry-wide target they use, they lack meaningful targets for evaluating the campaign. However, VHA could use information about how its metrics performed in the past to develop reasonable and meaningful targets for future performance. Without established targets for its metrics, VHA is missing an opportunity to better evaluate the effectiveness of its suicide prevention media outreach campaign.