

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

January 17, 2025

The Honorable Denis R. McDonough
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough:

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Phoenix VA have worked hard to reduce veteran suicide, including through community partnerships as outlined in VA's Suicide Prevention 2.0 initiative. We are now concerned about VA's cut to core funding for Be Connected, one of Arizona's suicide prevention community partnership programs—cuts that would impact Arizona veterans, their relationship to VA, and VA's ability to reduce veteran suicide.

Be Connected is a nationally recognized program that serves all service members, veterans, and their families. It complements VA's clinical care with true community-based upstream suicide prevention tactics, such as transportation and connection with wrap-around services. Importantly, it is a trusted partner in the veteran community—a necessary role as Arizona continues to recover from the 2014 Phoenix VA crisis and the exceedingly high rate (3-4x the national average) of Arizona veteran deaths by suicide in 2015-16. Be Connected was developed and implemented by the Arizona Coalition for Military Families (AZCMF), Arizona Department of Veterans' Services, and Phoenix VA. It receives one-third of its core funding from the state of Arizona and two-thirds from VA, **and it renews its contract with Phoenix VA annually.**

Unfortunately, Phoenix VA informed the AZCMF that it could not fund Be Connected after September 30, 2024, due to budgetary constraints. Veterans Integrated Services Network (VISN) 22 granted a funding extension until March 31, 2025, with the stated intent to negotiate a new contract starting April 1, 2025. Despite meetings between Be Connected and Phoenix VA in the fall of 2024, it appears Phoenix VA no longer intends to enter another contract with Be Connected and will stop its funding on March 31. With our veterans best interest in mind we request answers to the following:

1. When did VA decide to stop negotiating a new contract and permanently cease funding Be Connected? Please include any assessments, metrics, studies, etc., that played into this decision.
2. Did VA conduct an impact study or evaluation to assess how pulling core funding for Be Connected would impact the Arizona service member and veteran communities? If so, please provide documentation.
3. Since Be Connected will necessarily reduce its programming, how will VA fill the gap in services it currently provides, including: resource connection, care navigation, transportation, homeless standdown partner training and vetting, non-prescriptive rural tribal outreach, community helper training, rural crisis system support?

4. Has VA considered alternative sources of funding for the Be Connected partnership, so as to not depend entirely on local VA operating budgets? What alternative funding mechanisms could VA consider to fund this critical program?
5. Without Be Connected, how will VA maintain an impartial, community-driven bridge to continue improving trust in and utilization of VA services in Arizona specifically?

We appreciate a timely response to our questions and a briefing on this matter as soon as possible. We hope VA will sustain its funding for this vital program. Thank you for your attention.

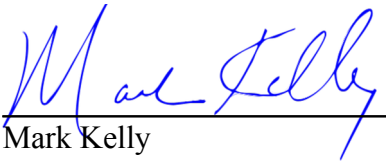
Sincerely,



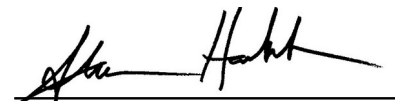
Juan Ciscomani
Member of Congress



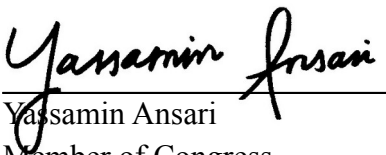
Greg Stanton
Member of Congress



Mark Kelly
United States Senator



Abraham J. Hamadeh
Member of Congress



Yassamin Ansari
Member of Congress



Andy Biggs
Member of Congress



Raúl M. Grijalva
Member of Congress



Ruben Gallego
United States Senator