

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 2, 2016

VIA ELECTRONIC TRANSMISSION

The Honorable Michael J. Missal
Inspector General
Department of Veterans Affairs
801 I Street, NW
Washington, DC 20001

Dear Inspector General Missal:

On July 7, 2016, Brandon Ketchum, a veteran of the Marine Corps and Army National Guard, found himself at a crisis point, believing himself to be a threat to his own safety and sought the assistance of the Iowa City VA Medical Center.¹ Despite his year-long treatment with a psychiatrist at the facility that knew of his struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder as well as repeated flags for suicide over the last three years, his request to be admitted to the psychiatric ward due to what he termed “serious mental issues,” was reportedly denied.² Mr. Ketchum took his own life just over 24 hours later.

Since Mr. Ketchum’s tragic death, a representative for the medical center has stated that the standing policy is to never turn away a patient who requires admittance as long as beds are open. Further, according to news reports, the Iowa City VA Medical Center stated, “If a patient requires admission and we do not have beds available at our facility, we would find them a bed at another facility.”³

The VA has a long history of serving those who protect the United States, which begins with some of the nation’s earliest combative enterprises. In 2013, the Department of Veterans Affairs released a set of clinical practice guidelines that highlighted the dangers that suicidal tendency pose to the general population, and to veterans in particular.⁴ Prior to this, in 2008, the VA introduced a mental health handbook, still in use today, to guide VA hospitals and facilities in their practice of supporting and aiding veterans who grapple with these issues.⁵ These publications urge veterans to seek assistance and state that any crisis that involves suicidal feelings will receive attention from medical professionals and the individual will receive care.⁶

¹ Neumann, Greg, *Digging Deeper: Could the VA Have Done More to Prevent the Suicide of a Wisconsin Dells Native?*, (Jul. 13, 2016), available at <http://www.wkow.com/story/32430789/2016/07/12/digging-deeper-could-the-va-have-done-more-to-prevent-the-suicide-of-a-wisconsin-dells-native>

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ The Assessment and Management of Risk for Suicide Working Group, VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guide for Assessment and Management of Patients at Risk for Suicide, (Jun. 2013), available at http://www.healthquality.va.gov/guidelines/MH/srb/VADODCP_SuicideRisk_Full.pdf

⁵ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, *Guide to VA Mental Health Services for Veterans and Families*, available at http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/MHG_English.pdf

⁶ *Id.*

In light of what has transpired, we strongly urge your office to examine the facts and circumstances of Mr. Ketchum's interactions with the Iowa City VA Medical Center on July 7, 2016 to determine what, if any, steps can be taken in the future to better protect our veteran population, including potential changes to VA policy, if applicable. It is also important for policymakers within the VA and in Congress to know if this is an isolated incident, how often veterans seeking inpatient mental health care are turned away, and how often this leads to adverse consequences.

Please respond by August 16, 2016, and inform us whether you have decided to open an inquiry into the matter. If not, please explain why not. If an inquiry is opened, we further request that you provide updates on its status, when appropriate. For any questions going forward, please contact Josh Flynn-Brown of Senator Grassley's Judiciary Committee staff at (202) 224-5225, Brian Downey of Senator Johnson's Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee staff at (202) 224-4751, and Katherina Dimenstein of Senator Ernst's staff at (202) 224-3254.

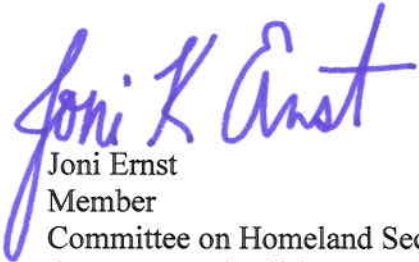
Sincerely,



Ron Johnson
Chairman
Committee on Homeland Security and
Governmental Affairs



Charles E. Grassley
Chairman
Committee on the Judiciary



Joni Ernst
Member
Committee on Homeland Security and
Governmental Affairs

cc: The Honorable Thomas R. Carper
Ranking Member
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

The Honorable Patrick J. Leahy
Ranking Member
Committee on the Judiciary