

# Veterans Crisis Line

## FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The materials designed to raise awareness of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA's) Veterans Crisis Line (VCL) constitute one of four federally funded mental health public awareness campaigns that RAND is evaluating as part of a cross-agency evaluation (funded by the Department of Defense Psychological Health Center of Excellence) aimed at improving the mental health of service members and veterans. A cross-agency evaluation report describes the campaigns' overlapping and unique scope and content, as well as cross-campaign dissemination efforts. Based on the cross-agency evaluation report, this brief about VCL awareness materials is one in a series examining the individual campaigns' messages, the consistency of messaging in their materials, and the tools they use to deliver content to their audiences. Because the results presented here are from an evaluation of the four campaigns' collective reach and impact, they are not intended to serve as a full and comprehensive evaluation of the VCL campaign. It should also be noted that this evaluation focuses on the materials designed to raise awareness of VCL and not on the functioning or operations of the crisis line itself.

## FINDINGS

The following are some key findings about the VCL awareness campaign from the RAND research team's content analysis of campaign materials, an analysis of campaign-collected communication metrics, and a panel of experts who assessed the extent to which the VCL campaign's content and design align with best practices for mental health public awareness campaigns.

### VETERANS CRISIS LINE CAMPAIGN CONTENT GENERALLY REFLECTS THE TARGET AUDIENCE OF VETERANS AND THEIR FRIENDS AND FAMILIES

Of the 201 pieces of VCL content reviewed, 75 percent was tailored to the friends and families of veterans, and 14 percent was tailored to veterans themselves. Nearly all materials focused on communicating treatment options and resources, providing examples of how friends and family can help, or connecting individuals to the crisis line.

### ABOUT VETERANS CRISIS LINE

VCL is a free, confidential 24-hour service that provides specialized care to veterans in crisis and resources to their families and friends and can be accessed by telephone, text, or online chat. It provides immediate crisis intervention and, when necessary, connects veterans with local services, such as VA suicide prevention coordinators or emergency services. The goal of VCL materials is to increase awareness and use of VCL. The campaign's key messages are "If you are in crisis, contact the Veterans Crisis Line" and "One call, one text, one conversation can save a life." The materials target veterans in general but also aim to reach specific subgroups that are at risk (e.g., women, veterans under age 20 and over age 45), as well as families of veterans in need. VCL materials are disseminated primarily through grassroots outreach, online advertising, events, media efforts (e.g., billboards, television and radio public service announcements [PSAs]), social media, and VA suicide prevention coordinators.

## THE VETERANS CRISIS LINE CAMPAIGN STAYS ON MESSAGE

Virtually all VCL campaign content clearly communicated its stated messages. In addition, the campaign content supported messages that corresponded with shared goals across the campaigns being evaluated (for example, offering resources for those in crisis).

## THE VETERANS CRISIS LINE CAMPAIGN USES BEST PRACTICES

VCL campaign materials generally adhered to best practices. Experts also indicated that the communication channels used by VCL were appropriate for its target audience, messengers were credible, and the campaign used evidence-based messages.

## VETERANS CRISIS LINE CAMPAIGN MATERIALS DO NOT IDENTIFY INFORMATION SOURCES

Despite relying on published research findings and internal experts to develop the materials, VCL materials intentionally omit source information. The campaign staff strategically minimized citations to avoid appearing overly technical and to appeal to the target audience. However, this design choice could make it difficult for users to judge credibility or seek out more information.

## WEBSITE TRAFFIC IS CLIMBING

In 2015, the VCL website played host to more than 930,000 sessions. Although the other campaigns in the evaluation had more web traffic, VCL saw the greatest increase in



**155%**

**INCREASE IN WEBSITE SESSIONS FROM 2012 TO 2015**

website sessions since 2012, at 155 percent. VCL was the only campaign to consistently increase its reach every year.

## CAMPAIGNS COLLECTIVELY DO LITTLE CROSS-REFERENCING AND CROSS-LINKING

The other campaigns in the evaluation all cross-reference or link to VCL, but VCL links to only one of the other campaigns. There might be other opportunities for the four campaigns' websites to link to each other as resources.



**9.5 MILLION**

**PIECES OF VCL CAMPAIGN MATERIAL WERE DISTRIBUTED**

## THE VETERANS CRISIS LINE'S CAMPAIGN OUTREACH THROUGH EVENTS IS UNPARALLELED AMONG THE CAMPAIGNS

VCL conducts much of its outreach through conferences and events. The campaign had a presence at 207 events—compared with 32 for the campaign with the second-most-active calendar—and distributed nearly 9.5 million pieces of campaign material.

## THE VETERANS CRISIS LINE CAMPAIGN HAS LITTLE PRESENCE ON SOCIAL MEDIA

The VCL campaign lacks an active Facebook page, Twitter handle, or YouTube channel.

## THE VETERANS CRISIS LINE CAMPAIGN'S PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENTS REACH A RELATIVELY SMALL AUDIENCE

VCL aired 128,948 radio PSAs and 43,616 television PSAs, for a combined 981 million impressions (the number of audience members who might have been exposed to the PSAs). That is about 2 percent of the 42.9 billion impressions for the four campaigns combined.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The experts recommended several approaches to improving VCL's campaign materials. See the full report (available at [www.rand.org/t/RR1612](http://www.rand.org/t/RR1612)) for a complete list of recommendations based on the cross-campaign analysis.

- **DESPITE** many campaign materials targeting family and friends of veterans, experts recommended strengthening materials for these target audiences by adding more content on how family and friends can help identify signs of crisis and facilitate access to VCL.
- **REVIEW** materials and determine whether source information should be provided.
- **CONSIDER** cross-referencing other campaigns more in materials and online.
- **CONSIDER** developing a more robust social media presence to better engage the audience.
- **CONSIDER** adjusting promotional materials to show users chatting, texting, or calling VCL and the associated benefits of doing so.

This brief describes work done in the RAND National Defense Research Institute and documented in *Cross-Agency Evaluation of DoD, VA, and HHS Mental Health Public Awareness Campaigns: Analysis of Campaign Scope, Content, and Reach*, by Joie D. Acosta, Jennifer L. Cerully, Eunice C. Wong, Elizabeth L. Petrun Sayers, Mikhail Zaydman, Lisa S. Meredith, Ilana Blum, Nupur Nanda, Terri Tanielian, Rachel Ross, and Asa Wilks, RR-1612-OSD, 2020 (available at [www.rand.org/t/RR1612](http://www.rand.org/t/RR1612)). To view this brief online, visit [www.rand.org/t/RB10007z5](http://www.rand.org/t/RB10007z5). The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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