

Testimony on SB 762 Veterans and Emergency Preparedness
Judy Cushing, CEO / Lines for Life
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Chair Boquist, members of the committee, my name is Judy Cushing, CEO of Lines for Life, a nonprofit that works to prevent substance abuse and suicide. I am here to update you on Veteran Suicides and the importance for Veterans to know how and where to get the help they need

Veteran suicide is a growing problem. The latest estimate is that a Veteran takes his/her life every 65 minutes – that's 22 a day. Veterans account for 27 percent of Oregon's suicides. These statistics are especially tragic as suicide is preventable. After selflessly serving our country, our veterans deserve the support and services available to them but many don't know how to access them.

Suicide is preventable and Post Traumatic Stress is treatable. These men and women are not broken. But if they don't have a safe place to reach out without fear of repercussion or shame, veterans tend to keep their emotions bottled up until they just can't take it anymore. 30 percent of our veterans deal with PTSD, depression, anxiety attacks and other mental health illnesses but they are reluctant to seek help.

We see the need of veterans every day on the Lines for Life Military Helpline. Last year we received 1,801 military-related calls from 32 of the 36 Oregon Counties. 175 of those callers reported persistent suicidal thoughts, 47 had previous attempts, 62 had a plan and 14 had set a time. You can learn more detail about the calls from data provided in the packets and via PDF's.

Many vets are confused or have no idea where to turn for help. Some of them have had a negative experience with the red tape of government. Others are reluctant to identify their struggles with the issues that can lead to suicide. That reluctance is based partly in the warrior mentality of "suck it up, don't be weak" and the toxic stigma that surrounds mental illness and mental trauma.

Oregon Partnership / Lines for Life's Military Helpline (1-888-HLP-4-VET) provides an anonymous place for veterans and their families to speak with veterans and counselors trained in military culture. The combination of anonymity, non judgmental help and shared experience is powerful. It gives them a safe place to vent and to explore other options than taking their own lives or lives of others. Our crisis counselors de-escalate 95 percent of the military-related suicide calls we receive.

Oregon vets and their families need to know where they can get appropriate help and they need to know the danger signs of suicide and severe mental illness. A sweeping effort to publicize relevant resources is imperative if we are to save lives.

We urge you to back our veterans by passing Senate Bill 762.