

No Sense of Urgency': Mental Health Calls to VA Go Unanswered



Jim Lindenmayer, director of the Cherokee County Homeless Veteran Program speaks during a meeting about forming a mental health coalition for veterans on Wednesday, April 12, 2023 in Canton, Ga. (Natrice Miller)

In early 2021, the mental health of one Atlanta veteran was deteriorating. She lay awake every night, unable to sleep or stop herself from crying. Through her tears, she picked up the phone and called the Atlanta VA for help.

No one answered.

That happened several times to the veteran, who estimated she called the Atlanta VA about 10 times in the span of three months. About half the time, someone answered the phone. She has since gotten help from the VA, but knows it shouldn't have been so difficult.

"I don't know how many veterans would have been able to go through that rejection as many times as I did," said the veteran, who requested anonymity for fear that speaking publicly could negatively impact her job.

She's not the only one. Thousands of mental health calls to the Atlanta VA have gone unanswered over the past year, according to a recent whistleblower complaint obtained by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. The complaint alleges that out of roughly 22,000 mental health calls that were made to the Atlanta VA Health Care System over a 12-month period ending in January, about 7,200 went unanswered. The reason, according to the complaint made to the VA office of the inspector general, is that the VA's Human Resources Department is slow in hiring applicants who can answer the phones.

When asked about the complaint, an Atlanta VA spokesperson said the matter is being investigated.

"The health and well-being of veterans is our number one priority," said Gregory Kendall, a spokesperson with the Atlanta VA. "We are actively investigating these reports to ensure that veterans who call the Atlanta VA Health Care System get the timely responses and care they deserve."

According to documents reviewed by the AJC, the VA Office of the Inspector General has received the whistleblower's complaint. A spokesperson for the OIG said the office "does not confirm or deny" if a complaint is submitted, but reviews all complaints it receives.

The whistleblower complaint comes as government officials are bringing increased pressure to improve mental health services for military veterans in Georgia and across the nation. The federal government is doling out money towards suicide prevention, and Georgia lawmakers recently passed a bill that would improve mental health access for veterans in far-flung areas of the state.

But veterans and advocates say the basic systems in place to treat the mental health of thousands of veterans in Georgia are broken.

There is a shortage of therapists in the VA who can treat military veterans in the state, meaning the mental health services are very limited, according to Jim Lindenmayer, director and founder of the Cherokee County Homeless Veterans Program. There's also frequent staff turnover, Lindenmayer said, meaning that even those veterans who are able to secure services often are getting inconsistent care as they switch therapists. He's even spoken with veterans who have made appointments and the therapists don't show up.

"Calls are canceled or no one's there," said Lindenmayer, whose program serves many veterans who struggle with their mental health. "These veterans have [mental health conditions] that are triggering them already, and the VA is not responsive."

A whistleblower's complaint

The problems that plague the mental health system for veterans are undoubtedly complex, but the complaint made by the whistleblower is simple enough: there aren't enough workers to answer the phone calls coming into the Atlanta VA.

"There is no sense of urgency," the whistleblower wrote. Under federal law, whistleblowers are protected against retaliation from their employer. The AJC is not naming the whistleblower in order to provide additional protection for the person's job.

The complaint doesn't go into great detail about how the calls came in or were tracked, just the fact that thousands of calls are allegedly going unanswered. At the time the complaint was filed earlier this year, it reported the Atlanta VA has about a third of the staff needed to answer calls.

Human resources staff at the Atlanta VA are aware of the problems, the whistleblower wrote, but the complaints about staffing have gone "unnoticed and unheard."

"The ability of the department to answer phones and schedule appointments has been severely impacted," the whistleblower wrote.

In the past, the AJC and other media have reported the Atlanta VA has been plagued with problems around its mental health services for veterans. For example, in [2013, a rash of veteran suicides at the center were blamed on mismanagement within its mental health unit](#). In 2014, the center was on the hot seat after the murder-suicide of Marine veteran. Two years later,

the [Atlanta VA completed the installation](#) of an anti-climbing fence to prevent veterans from attempting to kill themselves.

According to the VA, the number of veterans who have died by suicide has gradually decreased in recent years. But the number of veterans who have died by suicide is far higher than in the general population, a fact that stands out when examining Georgia-specific data.

In 2020, an average of 26 veterans per 100,000 living in Georgia have died by suicide. That's lower than the national average, which is 32 veterans per 100,000, but much higher than Georgians who are not veterans, which is 18 non-veterans per 100,000.

Mental health services are inadequate for veterans nationwide, said Jim Lorraine, the president and CEO of America's Warrior Partnership, whose organization works to prevent veteran's dying by suicide. He said the VA is often reluctant to refer veterans outside of the VA system for care, including in Atlanta, even when they don't have enough capacity to serve veterans.

Lorraine said the whistleblower complaint was not surprising. The VA has a reputation for a notoriously slow hiring process, he says, which then makes it even more difficult for veterans to receive services.

"I have friends whose process for getting hired to the VA was a year-and-a-half. It is a laborious process," he said. "The joke everyone says is 'If you want to get a job in two years, apply to the VA.'"

The Atlanta VA did not provide clarity about whether there are issues with hiring or don't have enough people to answer phone lines.

One veteran's odyssey for help

The first three months of 2021 were hell for the veteran who wouldn't give up calling the Atlanta VA.

She has a PTSD diagnosis, anxiety and depression from serving in combat. She also experienced sexual assault during her deployment.

When VA employees did pick up her calls, the veteran was told a mental health professional would call her back. But no one did.

“I just remember being in tears every time I called, saying ‘I’m really stressed out. I’m not sleeping, I’m constantly crying, I’m not okay,” she said, and begged to speak to someone in mental health.

“Calling the VA is extremely stressful, because you often get the runaround,” she said. “I would have to work myself up to have the energy in these moments of crisis.”

The last time this veteran called the VA, she told the worker who answered that she felt like she “wanted to go to sleep forever.” That prompted someone from the VA to send her a drug prescription, but even then a mental health provider never followed up.

During another crisis in March, she drove herself to the Atlanta VA emergency room. That’s when she was finally checked in for care.

“I don’t even know how I mustered up the strength to get myself to the point that I did,” she said. “It’s important that this is talked about and brought to light.”

Improving the system

Lindenmayer, director and founder of the Cherokee County Homeless Veterans Program, said that traditionally, veterans don’t seek treatment for mental health conditions.

“Veterans are very proud,” he said. “They don’t ask for help.”

The good news is that that mindset is changing, Lindenmayer said. It’s become more acceptable to talk about post-traumatic stress disorder and the other emotional scars from serving in the military. And he is seeing more veterans seeking help, even if the VA can’t keep up.

Policymakers are also increasingly focused on mental health and veterans. For example, a recent bill that passed the Legislature will help provide free mental health and behavioral health services to veterans, military members, and their families. Separately, the state received a federal grant for mental health screenings that determine if a veteran is at risk for suicide and refer them to the VA or community groups that can offer care.

In Congress, U.S. Sen. Jon Ossoff [recently sponsored a bill](#) that reduces out-of-pocket expenses for veterans seeking mental health or substance abuse treatment at the VA that’s since become law. U.S. Sen. Raphael Warnock’s

office says he is exploring ways to support the VA's ability to increase staffing, particularly among mental health professionals.

But Lorraine, whose organization works to prevent veteran's dying by suicide, said there's so much more work that needs to be done. He said the whistleblower complaint was "tragic," particularly because he thinks there are enough mental health professionals to serve veterans in the greater Atlanta area.

"There's there is enough capacity in the Greater Atlanta area, whether it's within the VA or within the community," he said. "Veterans just have to have the opportunity."

WHERE VETERANS CAN SEEK HELP

- Veterans who want to reach the Atlanta VA Health Care System directly should call (404) 329-2222, according to the Atlanta VA. For veterans who are in crisis and seeking immediate help, the VA instructed veterans to call the number 9-8-8, which is a national mental health hotline, and then dial 1 for specific help for veterans and their families. Callers do not need to be enrolled in VA benefits or health care to connect: www.veteranscrisisline.net/.
- Emory Healthcare Veterans Program is a two-week intensive program for veterans, treating a number of illnesses, including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and substance abuse disorders. The services are free for veterans, and include travel, lodging, and meals. Learn more here: www.emoryhealthcare.org/centers-programs/veterans-program.
- The Warrior Alliance is a veteran's organization that is affiliated with America's Warrior Partnership. Number: (404) 210-1776
Email: info@thewarrioralliance.org.
- The Cherokee County Homeless Veterans Program serves veterans in Cherokee County by providing help with food, limited housing, clothing, and other support. Learn more here: www.cherokeehomelessveterans.com.

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