

Testimony on Senate Bill 5538 Relating to the financial administration of the Department of Veterans' Affairs

**David Westbrook, COO / Lines for Life
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Co-Chair Senator Manning, Co-Chair Representative Gomberg, and members of the committee, my name is David Westbrook and I am the Chief Operating Officer at Lines for Life. Lines for Life is a nonprofit where the mission is preventing substance and suicide and promoting mental wellness. We do this in part by answering crisis lines in all three of these areas. Lines for Life is the Oregon affiliate for the National Suicide Prevention Line and the only non-governmental agency to answer America's Veterans Crisis Line. Most relevant to today's hearing, we answer the Oregon Military Suicide Prevention Helpline a confidential source of help for Oregon military personnel and their families.

Today I am here to speak in support of SB 5538. As you may be aware, in 2013 Senate Bill 762 established Oregon's veterans' crisis and suicide prevention hotline, dubbed the Oregon Military Helpline. During the 2017 session Measure 96 Lottery Funds were allocated to ODVA to, in part, provide permanent funding for the veterans' crisis and suicide prevention hotline. Lines for Life currently holds the contract to operate this hotline. Through this lens we see the need of veterans every day. In 2018 Lines for Life answered 3,264 calls on the Oregon Military Helpline.

About 75% of the callers to the Oregon Military Helpline are veterans. Those callers who are not veterans, are family members of veterans, active duty members, and family members of active duty members. Lines for Life tracks what callers are calling about. In addition to thoughts of suicide, the most frequent issues callers identify are mental health/illness, including PTSD, financial stressors, relationship issues, homelessness, and illness or injury. All of these are serious stressors known to be potential precursors to suicide. The Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs budget addresses many of these concerns.

The problem of veteran suicide in Oregon is significant. Although veterans represent only eight percent of our population they account of 16% of our suicides. The most vulnerable include veterans 55 years and older. In Oregon this population comprises approximately 60% of veteran suicides.

Lines for Life is pleased to see that the ODVA budget prioritizes services for aging veterans, veteran housing, veterans' homes, behavioral health care, and suicide prevention. From the veterans that we speak with every day, we know these are some of their most critical concerns. Concerns that left unaddressed lead to crisis, thoughts of suicide and ultimately suicide itself. We also know that the right help, the type of help provided through the ODVA budget can prevent suicide.

We urge you to support our veterans by supporting the passage of Senate Bill 5538.

