Randomized Evaluation of Caring Letters

Evaluating an innovative Caring Letters project for Veterans Crisis Line contacts

The Veterans Crisis Line (VCL) is expanding its critical crisis intervention work to provide support beyond the call by implementing a Caring Letters project for over 100,000 Veterans annually. This randomized QUERI partnered evaluation will examine the impact of implementing Caring Letters among Veterans who contact the VCL and provide actionable guidance to enhance program sustainability.

Veterans Crisis Line expanding support to Veterans

Caring Letters are brief, nondemanding messages that express caring concern, which have been found to reduce the rate of suicide, attempts, and ideation for individuals receiving them. The 2019 VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guidelines suggest sending Caring Letters in addition to usual care for some individuals with elevated risk.

Callers to the VCL may be at increased risk of death by suicide, with a suicide rate several times higher than the general Veteran population.

Veterans enrolled in the Caring Letters project receive 9 letters over the course of a year after their initial contact with the VCL. In the Spring of 2022, the VCL Caring Letters project expanded to include a 6-month re-enrollment of some Veterans who contact VCL again after completing the initial intervention.

Fig 1. Sample Resource Card included with Caring Letters

The Veterans Crisis Line is continuing to enroll Veterans beyond the evaluation cohort, and as of month 22 over 1,130,000 Caring Letters have been mailed to more than 170,000 unique Veterans.
Comprised of an interdisciplinary group of investigators embedded in medical centers across VA, the Randomized Evaluation of Caring Letters project team will evaluate the effectiveness of Caring Letters among Veterans who contact the VCL, assessing the impact of both peer and provider signatures.

The program evaluation will examine:

- Clinical outcomes and VA utilization rates by comparing the contact group with rates from a comparable historical cohort of Veterans who contacted the VCL.
- Program implementation metrics using the RE-AIM framework.
- Sustainability of implementing and maintaining the VCL Caring Letters project through budget impact analysis.

Fig 2. Sample Caring Letter

Dear [first name],

It has been a little while since I wrote. I hope this note brightens your day a little. I just wanted to reach out again to let you know I care about how you’re doing. I hope in some way you enjoy receiving these cards.

I like to include the VA’s phone number in case it is helpful. You can call the VA at 1-800-698-2411. Just press “0” to speak directly with someone who can help connect you to whatever you need.

Thinking of you,
Dr. Alan

Fig 3. Evaluation Timeline: using the RE-AIM Framework

For more information, check out:

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