

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 18, 2019

The Honorable Ajit Pai
Chairman
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th St. SW
Washington, DC 20554

Dear Chairman Pai:

As bipartisan Members of the Senate Commerce Committee who deeply understand the importance of suicide prevention, thank you and the Federal Communications Commission (“FCC”) for your important work implementing the *National Suicide Hotline Improvement Act of 2018* (H.R. 2345, “the Hotline Improvement Act” or “the Act”). We urge the FCC to include the need for specialized suicide prevention services for LGBTQ youth in its final report given that more than 100 organizations commented on this need. We also ask that improvement in care for Veterans also be a component of FCC’s recommendations. Moreover, it is our view that the critical nature of this issue rises to the level of full review and vote by the FCC Commissioners.

By way of background and as you are aware, the Hotline Improvement Act directs the FCC to examine the feasibility of an N11 code for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (“the NSPL” or “the Lifeline”), administered by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (“SAMHSA”). Against the backdrop of the NSPL’s success in expanding its network to over 150 member centers and reaching millions of Americans unfolds a suicide epidemic. The nation’s suicide rates, as reported by the Center for Disease Control (CDC), rose by 24% between 1999 and 2016. In fact, nearly 45,000 suicides occurred in the United States in 2016, twice the number of homicides.

Dishearteningly, there are communities who are disproportionately impacted by the suicide epidemic. The CDC reported in 2016 that LGBTQ youth contemplate suicide at a rate nearly three times higher compared to heterosexual youth. Over 500,000 LGBTQ American youth will attempt suicide this year, and many more will contemplate it. As Senator Orrin Hatch (R-UT), the Act’s original sponsor offered in a floor statement:

The prevalence of suicide, especially among LGBT teens, is a serious problem that requires national attention. No one should feel less because their gender identity or because their orientation. They deserve our unwavering love and support. They deserve our validation and the assurance that not only is there a place for them in this society but that it is far better off because of them. These young people need us, and we desperately need them.

In addition to LGBTQ youth, it is also critical that FCC acknowledge further work needs to be done to support the Veterans community. As the FCC considers recommendations, we also ask that improvements in care for the Veterans community also be considered, as more than 20

Veterans and military members die by suicide every day. Additionally, the risk of committing suicide to veterans is 22% higher compared to non-veteran adults. While the Veterans Crisis Line has answered over 3.5 million calls since 2007, we believe there is further opportunity to provide specialized services to Veterans by making sure they get immediate access to the care they need.

Acutely aware of this, the directive from Congress is clear: as a nation, together we should and must do more to prevent suicide. Therefore, the Act seeks to allow improved and easier access to our nation's best suicide prevention resources, and asks FCC to recommend methods to improve the infrastructure and efficacy of the Lifeline as part of its report to be submitted in August.

FCC has the ability to act now by recommending the provision of further specialized services for these high-risk groups. Encouragingly, existing services tailored to these communities have been proven to reduce suicide rates at greater speeds. In the case of LGBTQ youth, SAMHSA could also consider establishing an Interactive Voice Response (IVR) to a group that has the resources and expertise to best serve this population, like The Trevor Project. Another possibility is for specialty partners across all at-risk groups to assist SAMHSA in conducting further trainings to increase the ability for existing counselors to best service callers.

The Hotline Improvement Act creates an important opportunity to significantly reduce the suicide rate in the United States, and we thank you for your continued dedication in saving lives. As FCC considers ways to improve the overall operations and efficacy of the Lifeline, we ask that attention to the LGBTQ youth and Veteran communities be specifically considered. Due to the important nature of these topics, we also ask the Commission to review the recommendations in a public meeting. We look forward to reviewing the FCC's recommendations in the near future.

Sincerely,



Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator

Dan Sullivan
United States Senator

CC: Commissioner O'Rielly
Commissioner Carr
Commissioner Rosenworcel
Commissioner Starks
Kris Monteith, Bureau Chief, Wireline Competition Bureau