

ANGUS S. KING, JR.  
MAINE

133 HART SENATE OFFICE BUILDING (202)  
224-5344  
Website: <https://www.king.senate.gov>

**United States Senate**  
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

COMMITTEES  
ARMED SERVICES  
CHAIRMAN, STRATEGIC FORCES  
SUBCOMMITTEE  
ENERGY AND  
NATURAL RESOURCES  
CHAIRMAN, NATIONAL PARKS SUBCOMMITTEE  
INTELLIGENCE  
VETERANS AFFAIRS

September 17, 2024

Secretary Denis R. McDonough  
Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Ave, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough,

September is National Suicide Prevention Month and I write to thank you for the work the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has done to address veteran suicides. While the steps you have taken are important, I believe that there is still more to do. Nearly three-quarters of all veteran suicide deaths involve a firearm<sup>1</sup> and veterans are three times more likely to die by gun suicide than non-veterans.<sup>2</sup> While many factors contribute to suicide, having easy access to lethal means such as a firearm during a moment of crisis can mean the difference between life and death, and with nearly half of all veterans reporting that they own guns (compared to 20% of non-veterans)<sup>3</sup>, the high rate of firearm suicide deaths among veterans is impossible to ignore.

This is why I recently introduced the *Lethal Means Safe Storage for Veteran Suicide Prevention Act*. This bill would provide funding to make sure that veterans have voluntary access to free gun safes or lock boxes so that they can safely store their weapons—putting valuable time and space between intrusive, suicidal thoughts and the lethal means to carry them out. Additionally, my bill would require that all providers treating veterans—at the VA and in the VA’s community care network—are trained to discuss lethal means, even if they aren’t mental health professionals. This would ensure that veterans can have basic conversations with any doctor about their mental health concerns. I understand that the VA is already working to update policies to require VHA providers complete certain suicide prevention training programs, including the Lethal Means Safety training outlined in my bill, on an annual basis, and I commend you for taking this action. I am hopeful we can find a way to train all our community care providers in the same manner so that veterans have the same opportunities for these mental health discussions, regardless of where they seek care.

---

<sup>1</sup> *2023 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report*, VA Suicide Prevention, Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention. November 2023. Page 27.

<sup>2</sup> *Those Who Serve: Addressing Firearm Suicide Among Military Veterans*, Everytown Research & Policy. March 7, 2024. <https://everytownresearch.org/report/those-who-serve/>

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

Additionally, my bill would require the VA to partner with veterans' service organizations (VSOs) to provide information to veterans about lethal means safety and safe storage options. I encourage you to use your existing authority to begin work in this space as soon as possible. I believe that efforts to work with VSOs to provide information to veterans, especially those who do not receive their health care through the VA, about the importance of suicide prevention, safe storage for lethal means (including firearms and medications), and planning ahead will save lives.

Many veterans—particularly those who do not regularly engage with the VA—may be apprehensive if their health care provider is asking about their access to firearms; many immediately worry that their continued ability to own firearms may be dependent on how they answer subsequent questions. In reality, these providers simply want to make sure that their patients are safe, especially during moments of crisis, and understanding what lethal means they might have access to is a crucial part of that planning process. Working with VSOs and having their peers—fellow veterans they know and trust—explain this process ahead of time could ease some anxiety among veterans who worry their right to own firearms might be at risk. Additionally, VSOs can draw on the wealth of experiences of their members to break the stigma associated with mental health struggles.

Thank you again for all the VA has done to support our veterans, especially those facing mental health struggles. As we mark another National Suicide Prevention Month, I look forward to working together on this issue so that we can reduce the number of veterans dying by firearm suicides.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Angus S. King, Jr." with a stylized flourish at the end.

---

ANGUS S. KING, JR.  
United States Senator