

Veterans in crisis can now text for help

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Veterans and service members contemplating suicide can now text for help through the Veterans Crisis Line, formerly the national Veterans Suicide Prevention Hotline.

The Veterans Affairs Department announced Wednesday that confidential text-messaging is available 24 hours a day by texting 83-8255.

Trained professionals will provide free mental health support, referrals and advice for military members, former service members and their families via texts.

The new number is one of several initiatives rolled out this month by VA to address suicide in the veteran population. VA also introduced toll-free access to its crisis line from Europe, according to a VA release.

The number is 0800-1273-8255, or 118 from a Defense Switched Network line.

During a November forum in Washington on the problem of military suicides, VA's National Mental Health Director Jan Kemp said VA needed to develop programs for post-9/11 veterans that meet their needs, which include their preferences for seeking help on the Internet or through their smart phones.

The text-message service is a step in that direction, Kemp said.

"We are working to meet their needs by communicating through multiple channels — over the phone, through online chat and now via text, which provides quick, easy access to support," Kemp said Feb. 15.

VA estimates it has received a half-million calls on its Veterans Crisis Line since it was introduced in 2007, engaging in 31,000 conversations and saving 18,000 veterans from harming themselves.