

# Veterans Administration Tried to Conceal Extent of Attempted Veteran Suicides, Email Shows

By [Jason Leopold](#)

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✖ Top officials at the Veterans Administration tried to conceal information from the public about the sudden increase of attempted suicides among veterans that were treated or sought help at VA hospitals around the country, a previously undisclosed internal VA email indicates.

The email was disclosed Tuesday in a federal trial at a courthouse in Northern California where two veterans advocacy groups filed a class-action lawsuit against the VA alleging that a systematic breakdown at the VA has led to an epidemic of suicides among war veterans. These groups claim the VA has turned away veterans who have sought help for posttraumatic stress disorder and were suicidal. Some of the veterans, the lawsuit claims, later took their own lives.

The organizations who filed the lawsuit, Veterans for Common Sense and Veterans United for Truth, want a federal judge to issue a preliminary injunction to force the VA to immediately treat veterans who show signs of PTSD and are at risk of suicide and overhaul internal system that handles benefits claims. PTSD is said to be the most prevalent mental disorder arising from combat.

The Feb. 13., 2008, email, disclosed in federal court Tuesday, was sent to Ira Katz, the VA's mental health director by Ev Chasen, the agency's chief communications director.

Chasen sought guidance from Katz about interview queries from CBS News, which reported extensively on veterans suicides last year.

"Is the fact that we're stopping [suicides] good news, or is the sheer number bad news? And is this more than we've ever seen before? It might be something we drop into a general release about our suicide prevention efforts, which (as you know far better than I) prominently include training employees to recognize the warning signs of suicide," Chasen wrote Katz in an email titled "Not for CBS News Interview Request."

Katz's response is startling. He said the VA has identified nearly 1,000 suicide attempts per month among war veterans treated by the VA. His response to Chasen indicates that he did not want the VA to immediately release any statistical data confirming that number, but rather suggested that the agency quietly slip the information into a news release.

"Shh!" Katz wrote in his response to Chasen. "Our suicide prevention coordinators are identifying about 1000 suicide attempts per month among the veterans we see in our medical facilities. Is this something we should (carefully) address ourselves in some sort of release before someone stumbles on it?"

The February email was sent shortly after the VA gave CBS News data that showed only a total of 790 attempted suicides in 2007 among veterans treated by the VA. In an email sent to the network Monday after Katz's email was disclosed in court, he denied a "cover-up" and said he did not disclose the true figures of attempted suicides because he was unsure if it was accurate.

In a December email Katz sent to Brig. Gen. Michael J. Kussman, the undersecretary for health at the Veterans Health Administration within the VA, that roughly 126 veterans of all wars commit suicide per week. He added that data the agency obtained from the Center for Disease Control showed that 20 percent of the suicides in the country are identified as war veterans.

The "VA's own data demonstrate 4-5 suicides per day among those who receive care from us," Katz said in the email he sent to Kussman.

Perhaps underscoring just how underprepared the VA was for the number of PTSD cases to emerge from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, documents released to support the plaintiffs' allegations show that prior to the U.S. Invasion of Iraq the VA believed it would likely see a maximum of 8,000 cases where veterans showed signs of PTSD.

Last week, the RAND Corporation released a study that said about 300,000 U.S. troops sent to combat in Iraq and Afghanistan are suffering from major depression or PTSD, and 320,000 received traumatic brain injuries. Since October 2001, about 1.6 million U.S. troops have deployed to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many soldiers have completed more than two tours of duty meaning they are exposed to prolonged periods of combat-related stress or traumatic events.

"There is a major health crisis facing those men and women who have served our nation in Iraq and Afghanistan," said Terri Tanielian, a researcher at RAND who worked on the study. "Unless they receive appropriate and effective care for these mental health conditions, there will be long-term consequences for them and for the nation. Unfortunately, we found there are many barriers preventing them from getting the high-quality treatment they need."

Those are statistics Paul Sullivan, the executive director of Veterans for Common Sense, has been warning lawmakers about for several years.

"The scope of PTSD in the long term is enormous and must be taken seriously. When all of our 1.6 million service members eventually return home from Iraq and Afghanistan, based on the current rate of 20 percent, VA may face up 320,000 total new veterans diagnosed with PTSD," Sullivan told a Congressional committee in July 2007. If America fails to act now and overhaul the broken DoD and VA disability systems, there may be a social catastrophe among many of our returning Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans. That is why VCS reluctantly filed suit against VA in Federal Court...Time is running out."

Sullivan has urged Congress to enact legislation to immediately overhaul the VA.

"Congress should legislate a presumption of service connection for veterans diagnosed [with] PTSD who deployed to a war zone after 9/11," Sullivan told lawmakers last year. "A presumption makes it easier for dedicated and hard-working VA employees to process veterans' claims. This results in faster medical treatment and benefits for our veterans."

Yet despite Sullivan's dire predictions and calls for legislative action the issue has not been given priority treatment by lawmakers. Instead, Congress continued to fund the war in Iraq to the tune of about \$200 billion and will likely pour another \$108 billion into Iraq later next month. Meanwhile, a backlog of veterans' benefits claims continue to pile up at the VA.

The VA said it has hired more than 3,000 mental healthcare professionals over the past two years to deal with the increasing number of PTSD cases, but the problems persist.

### **VA Says Vets Not 'Entitled' to Healthcare**

In opening statements Monday, Richard Lepley, a Justice Department attorney, said the VA runs a "world-class health care system."

But Gordon Erspamer, the lead attorney representing the two veterans groups, said the VA has arbitrarily denied coverage to thousands of vets, that it takes nearly a year to decide whether it will provide coverage to veterans suffering from PTSD, and takes as long as four years for the VA to address veterans appeals cases.

"Seeking help from the Department of Veterans' Affairs... involves a two-track system," says a copy of the plaintiff's trial brief filed in federal court last week.

"A veteran will go to the Veterans' Health Administration for diagnosis and medical care; and a veteran goes to the Veterans' Benefits Administration to apply for service-connection and disability compensation....

"VA is failing these veterans as they move along both of these parallel tracks. They are not receiving the healthcare to which they are entitled (and where they do receive it, it is unreasonably delayed) and they are not able to get timely compensation for their disabilities, which means that they have no safety net. These two problems combine to create a perfect storm for PTSD veterans: they receive no treatment, so their symptoms get worse; and they receive no compensation, so they cannot go elsewhere for treatment. The failings of these two separate but interrelated systems are what this action seeks to address."

The lawsuit the groups filed alleges that numerous VA practices stemming from a 1998 law violate the constitutional and statutory rights of veterans suffering from PTSD by denying veterans mandated medical care.

Justice Department attorneys had argued in court papers filed last month that Iraq and Afghanistan veterans were not "entitled" to the five-years of free healthcare upon their return from combat as mandated by Congress in the "Dignity for Wounded Warriors Act." Rather, the VA argued, medical treatment for the war veterans was discretionary based on the level of funding available in the VA's budget.

But during a court hearing hearing last month before U.S. District Court Judge Samuel Conti, Dr. Gerald Cross, the Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Health, Veterans Health Administration, said that veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan were not only entitled to free healthcare, but he said "there is no co-pay."

### **Soldier's Suicide Warnings Ignored**

Chris Scheuerman, a retired Special Forces masters sergeant, testified before a Congressional committee last month that there is an urgent need for mental health reform

in the military.

Scheuerman said his son, Pfc. Jason Scheuerman, went to see an Army psychologist because he had been suicidal.

The Army psychologist wrote up a report saying Jason Scheuerman “was capable of (faking) mental illness in order to manipulate his command,” according to documents the soldiers father turned over to Congress.

“Jason desperately needed a second opinion after his encounter with the Army psychologist,” Chris Scheuerman testified in mid-March before the Armed Services Committee’s Military Personnel Subcommittee.

“The Army did offer him that option, but at his own expense. How is a PFC (private first class) in the middle of Iraq supposed to get to a civilian mental health care provider at his own expense?” he said. “I believe a soldier should be afforded the opportunity to a second opinion via teleconference with a civilian mental health care provider of their own choice.”

Jason Scheuerman shot himself with a rifle on July 30, 2005. The 20-year-old’s suicide note was nailed to the close in his barracks. It said, “Maybe now I can get some peace.”

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