

# United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

November 5, 2015

Dear Colleague:

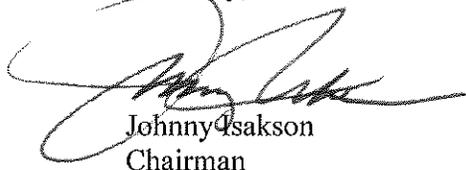
As we approach Veterans Day and reflect on the vast contributions of all who have worn the uniform in defense of our country, as Chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I wish to highlight the progress that we collectively have made this year on their behalf. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is without question an agency in crisis, rocked by scandals, plagued by a culture of corruption, and having lost the trust of many who need and rely on VA's benefits and services. Although a tremendous amount of work remains to be done – by VA and by Congress – to address the serious and widespread issues at all levels of this agency, I am pleased that we have been able to work together to begin making the changes necessary to ensure that veterans will be well served moving forward. These strides could not have been taken without your commitment to making our nation's veterans a top priority:

- Enactment of numerous laws to improve, reform, and reauthorize programs at VA (Public Laws 114-2, 114-19, 114-25, 114-31, 114-41, 114-58), including:
  - The Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act, to help address the serious problem of veteran suicide.
  - Numerous provisions to improve the Veterans Choice Program, by allowing more veterans to qualify to receive health care in their community, increasing the pool of non-VA providers eligible for the program, and extending the limitation on the provision of care in the community beyond 60 days to allow veterans to continue treatments that can span many months.
  - The Veterans Identification Card Act of 2015, to allow all veterans to more easily provide documentation of their military service.
  - Provisions to ensure completion of the hospital construction project in Denver, Colorado, in a fiscally responsible manner by ensuring that VA would identify and utilize existing appropriations to complete construction.
  - Provisions to reform VA's construction program to prevent cost over-runs and mismanagement by mandating that any VA construction project over \$100 million will be managed by the Army Corps of Engineers or another non-VA Federal entity.
  - Provisions to provide VA flexibility to reorganize existing funding to avoid a possible VA budget shortfall in certain health care accounts.
  - Provisions to extend authorization for VA to continue to carry out certain current programs, including VA's caregivers programs, homeless programs, adaptive sporting programs, and vocational benefits for members of the armed forces with severe injuries.

- Filling vacant leadership positions at VA with permanent leaders:
  - Senate confirmation of Dr. David Shulkin to be the Under Secretary for Health, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.
  - Senate confirmation of LaVerne Council to be the Assistant Secretary for Information and Technology, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.
- Striving to increase accountability of VA employees at all levels:
  - Committee approval of legislation to expedite removal or demotion of delinquent or underperforming VA employees (S. 1082) and to prevent VA from awarding bonuses to employees found to have committed misconduct (S. 627).
  - A bipartisan call from the Veterans' Affairs Committee for the Secretary to hold accountable executives involved in a multi-million dollar scheme to abuse VA's relocation program, leading to the resignation of the Under Secretary for Benefits.
- Increasing oversight of VA's activities:
  - Establishment of a policy of conducting regular business meetings with the Chairmen and Ranking Members of the Senate and House Committees on Veterans' Affairs and VA's leadership team at the VA headquarters to discuss veterans' healthcare and benefits challenges and potential solutions.
  - Field hearings on rampant mismanagement of the construction of the new Denver VA Medical Center and on problems with the Veterans Choice Program.
  - Oversight hearings on the Veterans Choice Program, VA opioid prescription policy, women veterans, veteran homelessness, toxic exposures, and mental health care.
  - Committee oversight visits to VA facilities in Louisville, Kentucky; Montgomery, Alabama; Atlanta, Georgia; Denver, Colorado; Phoenix, Arizona; Tampa, Bay Pines, and Gainesville, Florida; Albuquerque, New Mexico; and Anchorage, Alaska.

Although I believe this represents true progress, this should be viewed as a mere down-payment on what we owe the men and women who have bravely and selflessly served in the military. There is much more that must be done to bring true accountability at VA and to transform it into an organization worthy of those it serves. I remain steadfast in my commitment to address the systemic problems at VA and look forward to continuing to work with all of my colleagues to reform this agency for those who have served and have sacrificed on behalf of our entire nation.

Sincerely,



Johnny Tsakson  
Chairman