

JOHNNY ISAKSON, GEORGIA,  
CHAIRMAN  
JERRY MORAN, KANSAS  
JOHN BOOZMAN, ARKANSAS  
DEAN HELLER, NEVADA  
BILL CASSIDY, LOUISIANA  
MIKE ROUNDS, SOUTH DAKOTA  
THOM TILLIS, NORTH CAROLINA  
DAN SULLIVAN, ALASKA

JON TESTER, MONTANA,  
RANKING MEMBER  
PATTY MURRAY, WASHINGTON  
BERNARD SANDERS, VERMONT  
SHERROD BROWN, OHIO  
RICHARD BLUMENTHAL, CONNECTICUT  
MAZIE HIRONO, HAWAII  
JOE MANCHIN III, WEST VIRGINIA

# United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 20, 2017

The Honorable David A. Shulkin  
Secretary of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Mr. Secretary,

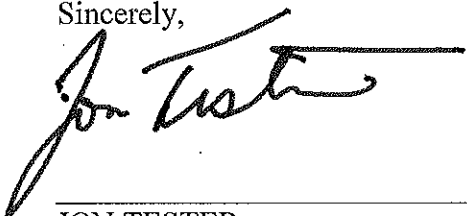
Given your focus on addressing the high suicide rate among our nation's veterans, and particularly your efforts to bring attention and resources to address expanded mental health services, we write to request that the Department of Veterans Affairs advocate for the creation of an Occupational Series for Licensed Professional Mental Health Counselors (LPMHCs) and Marriage and Family Therapists (MFTs) as one of the Agency's top priorities with the Office of Personnel Management (OPM).

There remain thousands of vacancies in mental health care delivery positions despite the Agency's attempts to create qualification standards to ease the hiring process for these professionals. In 2016, as then-Under Secretary for Health, you confirmed that the addition of LPMHCs and MFTs were a positive change for VA and expanded VA facilities' staffing options. At a critical time, when an increasing number of veterans require more mental health services, LPMHCs and MFTs are positioned to meet this urgent need and provide counseling to veterans suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, substance abuse, military sexual trauma, and related mental health issues.

VA officials frequently testify to Congress regarding the arduous process and excessive time it takes to hire clinical professionals. It is our understanding that the absence of an Occupational Series adds to the administrative workload of human resources personnel working to fill vacancies as well as creates more difficulties for qualified candidates to research and apply for open positions. Resolving this issue is a high priority for the Committee on Veterans' Affairs and the Committee on Appropriations, which included the recommendation to create the Occupational Series in report language for the FY18 MilCon-VA Appropriations Bill.

Again, we urge VA to include this as one of its top priorities to OPM. Hiring sufficient staff to provide health services in a timely and adequate manner is essential to providing the best quality of service to veterans, particularly those in crisis. We look forward to working with you and remain willing to assist in any way we can to ensure we meet this goal.

Sincerely,



JON TESTER  
United States Senator



JERRY MORAN  
United States Senator