

United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 9, 2018

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

Dear Secretary Shulkin,

I want to express my disappointment with the process through which veterans in my state and elsewhere have to navigate to apply for a Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Veterans Identification (ID) Card. Not only has it proven difficult for many veterans to access this benefit, but it has also excluded thousands of veterans from this recognition. I am confident that by highlighting these challenges, they will be resolved quickly.

In recent weeks, my office has been contacted by veterans who have been unnecessarily hindered in obtaining the ID card due to very burdensome IT requirements. This is a particular challenge for our nation's rural veterans, who lack ready access to high-speed internet or wireless connectivity. It is also a nearly insurmountable challenge for less technologically adept veterans or veterans with significant cognitive impairment to complete the multi-step application process, which requires verification steps across multiple computing platforms simultaneously. All eligible veterans – rural or urban, young or old – deserve easy access to the application for this veterans ID card and the implementation has failed to provide adequate consideration for these concerns. I urge you to take immediate steps to simplify this process and facilitate partnerships with your stakeholders at all levels to provide veterans with assistance in obtaining the ID card.

I raise these concerns to you after separate, prior attempts to conduct oversight over the delayed rollout of the ID card in late 2017. After the website crashed during the initial days of the initiative, my staff attempted to obtain answers from VA on several occasions regarding the planning and computing infrastructure that went into the rollout and the Department's subsequent efforts to contact veterans who had been unable to finalize their applications. Unfortunately, months later, answers have not been received and promised briefings have not been scheduled. While I understand that this may not be a high priority, it is unacceptable that there are still unanswered problems with the implementation of a program that went into law almost three years ago. This was a high-profile rollout preceding the Department's electronic health record modernization program, and it is critical that VA instill more trust for veterans in the Department's ability to implement new IT initiatives.

Finally, I am concerned about the thousands of veterans who are currently being excluded from this recognition because VA regulations are limiting the scope of the initiative to a subset of veterans, narrowing implementation of this initiative from the intent of Congress. As you know, this legislation allowed for a veteran to present his or her Department of Defense form DD-214 or other documents from their official military personnel file in order to request a veteran ID card. It did not specify any exclusion to veterans with a particular discharge and its intent was to make ID cards available to any person who served on active duty and was discharged under conditions other than dishonorable. However, as currently being implemented, VA's execution of this initiative runs contrary to that intent.

As you know, veterans are proud of their service and the nation has seen fit to provide this recognition to them. The Department should not allow bureaucratic burdens and an overreliance on poorly implemented IT solutions to keep many veterans from receiving this ID card. I urge you to fix this implementation, thus helping remove the stigma of veterans with "bad paper" discharges and making it easier to access for rural veterans.

I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Jon Tester
Ranking Member