

**** OPENING STATEMENT ****

- Dr. Stone and Dr. Lawrence, thank you for being here.
- The pandemic has stretched on for nearly a year – and experts say the worst is yet to come.
- VA runs the largest, integrated health care system in the country.
- During the coming weeks, it will have the dual responsibility of caring for sick veterans while distributing a coronavirus vaccine - once deemed safe and effective - to veterans and staff across the nation.
- FDA officials plan to meet tomorrow to discuss emergency use of the Pfizer vaccine. My understanding is that initial vaccine doses can be shipped within 24 hours of receiving FDA authorization.
- So with the first vaccine shipments potentially days away, I am troubled VA has yet to publish a comprehensive plan detailing how it will allocate and distribute the vaccine to frontline workers, high-risk veterans, and all other users of the system.
- Dr. Stone, I want to know what's causing the hold-up of a final plan, and what can be done to help move along things.

- I am particularly concerned how VA will reach staff and veterans in rural locations, where the coronavirus is spreading rapidly and overcrowding local hospitals.
- Whether it's a VA nursing home in Miles City, Montana or Washington DC, veterans and staff need to know there is a vaccine plan in place that will reach everyone, regardless of where they live or work.
- However, in Montana, I know there are no VA pharmacies currently equipped to receive or store the Pfizer vaccine, if approved.
- So I need to know a lot more about VA's plan for an equitable and safe distribution of a COVID-19 vaccine, and how veterans and VA staff in Montana and in other rural areas will be vaccinated against this deadly virus.
- I also want to know how VA intends to educate its staff and veterans on its vaccination plan. These folks need to know what to expect, when to expect it and how VA will notify them when it's their turn.
- And in the months it will take to get everyone vaccinated, VA's management of PPE, bed space, staffing, and more will continue to be important as the pandemic stretches on.

- Dr. Stone, it will be important for us to hear about the most challenging aspects of the next few months, and what is currently keeping you up at night.
- I want to say “thank you” to VA staff, especially frontline workers, who continue to serve our veterans throughout this crisis.
- I am also pleased to hear the transition process is taking place at VA. I appreciate you sharing knowledge and insight with the incoming Biden Administration. Now more than ever, a smooth transition is critical.
- The incoming Administration must know the toll this crisis is taking on the delivery of health care and benefits to veterans everywhere.
- So I ask that you continue to work closely with the transition team in the days ahead.
- Again, thank you for being here today.