

**** OPENING STATEMENT ****

- Dr. Stone, thank you and your team for being here today.
- Today - with two vaccines authorized for emergency use and being distributed across the country – we will take stock of how VA is doing in terms of reaching its workforce and the millions of veterans it serves.
- As Chairman of this Committee, my focus is bolstering the vaccine supply chain and ensuring there is a system to distribute the vaccine quickly and efficiently to all veterans, regardless of where they live.
- I know this a goal shared by Senator Moran, and I think all of my colleagues here.
- From what I understand, the Department is excelling at getting shots into arms in a safe and timely manner once doses are received from the Department of Health and Human Services.
- I commend you for your efforts to administer more than 2 million doses to veterans and employees so far - outpacing the private sector.
- Yesterday, Senator Moran and I had a productive conversation with Dr. David Kessler and General Gus Perna – the Biden Administration officials responsible for the

development, manufacture and distribution of coronavirus vaccines.

- We told them that VA has proven its ability to quickly deliver vaccines where they're most needed, and that the Department already has the capacity to deliver above and beyond its current allotment.
- Moving forward, we'll continue to press them for a larger allotment for VA, and we'll expect you to do the same.
- To-date, the Department has only received about 2.3 million doses. That means we still need about 17 million more doses to get veterans and staff fully vaccinated.
- Beyond concerns with the overall supply chain, which are being addressed, I remain most focused on how we can better reach veterans in rural, remote, and underserved areas.
- VA has piloted a vaccine fly-in program to rural areas of Montana like Havre and Kalispell, and to communities in Alaska, which I think is an innovative way to reach rural vets.
- However, we know that barriers remain to getting our rural veterans vaccinated in Montana and across the country.
- That's why we wanted Ralph Gigliotti from VISN 19 and Dr. William Patterson from VISN 15 with us today.

- I look forward to hearing more about how you, Dr. Stone, are allocating vaccines to the different VISNs – and then how you, Ralph and Dr. Patterson, are allocating them to different medical facilities.
- Whether a veteran lives next door to a VA Medical Center, or hundreds of miles away from the nearest one, all veterans must have equitable access in getting this vaccine.
- I know that reaching areas – particularly highly rural and frontier areas – brings both logistical challenges and potentially higher refusal rates than elsewhere. But we have to get this right.
- And we have to do a better job of communicating with veterans – setting their expectations and giving them a better idea of when, how and where to get a vaccine when it's their turn.
- Addressing these issues of both supply and demand are truly our best shot at ending this pandemic and getting our economy back on track.
- Thank you all for being here today and I look forward to the conversation ahead.