

Senator Jon Tester, Ranking Member
Opening Statement for the Record
Committee Hearing on the State of VA
January 17, 2018

Secretary Shulkin, thank you for being here. Mr. Chairman, thank you for your dedication to our nation's veterans. Largely due to your leadership, this Committee had a historic year in terms of the number and scope of bills we've had signed into law. A great deal of credit also goes to each member of Committee, as well as the tremendous advocacy of the VSOs in attendance and across the country.

Mr. Secretary, last year, you came before this committee and made a dramatic and urgent appeal for us to modernize the appeals process. We acted.

You came to us and said you needed more tools to hold bad actors at the VA accountable, and to protect whistleblowers. We acted.

You came to us multiple times when the Choice Program was running out of money. We acted. And then we acted again. And then we acted again.

For months, you also came to us and pitched ideas about how to scrap the Choice Program. And how to replace it with a community care program that puts veterans and their doctors in charge of where to receive care. We turned those ideas into a bill that passed this Committee 14-1 and with the support of 26 VSOs. And I don't want to let this moment pass without saying in the clearest terms how disappointed I am that you did not publicly announce your support for a bill on which we collaborated for months.

If VA is not going to publicly advocate for its legislative priorities, you should not expect this Committee or this Senator to do so.

Nevertheless, I am still committed to working with you and this administration to address the continued challenges of veterans and their families. Those challenges are daunting. They require action, not words. And they require us all working together.

In recent months, the VA and the Administration have rolled out a number of initiatives, most of which I have agreed with, but many of which have included little or no substance. We can help you make them successful, but there's little we can do if we're given no notice and no information.

And I'm afraid VA will continue to spin its wheels until you address the dramatic staffing vacancies that impact everything from the delivery of health care to the safeguarding of veterans' personal information. This is a fight I have waged for years. Nearly every time we have spoken, or I have spoken with your predecessors of both parties, I have asked for specific things that can be done to help recruitment and retention efforts.

And nearly every time, I have delivered – whether it was more flexibility, additional resources or additional authorities.

Yet here we are – somewhere between treading water and drowning. And veterans in places like Montana can't access the timely care they need and have earned.

These vacancies must be a higher priority for you and the Department. Otherwise, VA won't be able to fulfill its mission, and will setting itself up for failure as it moves forward on implementation of the many reforms that have come out of this committee. We have a lot of ground to cover, and I look forward to getting started. Thank you.