

United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 18, 2025

The Honorable Doug Collins
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Collins,

We write today to express our deep concerns with the setbacks to medical research at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) under your leadership. Although VA has begun to resolve some of your self-inflicted issues, including your multiple months-long hiring freeze on essential research staff, we call on you to take additional key actions to build back VA research. To rebuild this cornerstone of the United States' medical research enterprise, you must rehire VA researchers whose terms were not extended due to the hiring freeze, address the backlog of research positions that were frozen but are now able to be hired again, coordinate with the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to restore cancelled grants for VA researchers, and allow researchers to publish their findings without the unprecedented step of preapproval by political appointees.

Mr. Secretary, your hiring freeze has brought real-life impacts and pain upon our veterans – and reversing your hiring freeze for these positions months later is not enough to undo this harm. VA researchers often work on 2- or 3-year appointments – “not to exceed” (NTE) contracts – which, as long as the researcher has funding, are typically rolled over into new appointments. Due to your hiring freeze, essential researchers whose terms were ending soon were shown the door and forced to abandon often lifesaving work, and their positions were unable to be backfilled. These actions damaged veterans' access to cutting-edge treatments and clinical trials. For example:

- A clinical trial aimed at preventing dementia and heart disease was unable to renew a without compensation appointment and had to turn veterans away from enrollment.
- A substance use disorder study was paused due to an employee's termination, leaving progress stalled on a major public health issue affecting veterans at a rate higher than non-veterans.
- Critical research employees on a study predicting stroke risk were fired, leading this study to be halted.
- Enrollment in clinical trials for advanced cancers was delayed, limiting access to promising therapies.

To ensure there are no further impediments to this vital research, we request a list of all research positions that are still subject to the hiring freeze – including research positions at VA's Centers of Excellence and Centers of Innovation – and call on you to rehire all researchers who, through no fault of their own, had their NTE contracts expire during the hiring freeze. We also urge you to work with the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to quickly address the backlog in research staff hiring that your hiring freeze has engendered. VA research staff nationwide are reporting a significant backlog in the hiring process for critical research employees who are finally, after months of waiting, no longer subject to your hiring freeze. Failure to swiftly address this backlog will put veterans' health at risk, decimate the morale of an already understaffed research workforce, and undercut one of VA's best recruiting tools.

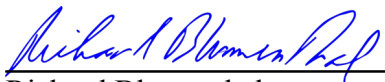
Furthermore, timely coordination with the National Institutes of Health – the nation’s leading biomedical research agency – is essential to restore any VA researchers’ canceled NIH grants. Our offices have heard from VA researchers whose studies on topics such as opioid use disorder among veterans have been halted due to NIH grant cancellations. We urge you to work with NIH to restore these grants and all other cancelled grants that funded studies to improve veterans’ health outcomes. We are similarly concerned that additional grants for VA researchers affiliated with academic institutions have been canceled, especially given VA’s refusal to answer repeated requests from our offices regarding the status of VA research at Harvard University. Reporting has noted that VA research projects associated with Harvard University – including studies on veteran suicide prevention, toxic exposure, and prostate cancer screening – have been proposed for termination. Veterans should not have to suffer due to this Administration’s political crusade on research and academia. We urge you to work to restore any such canceled grants without delay.

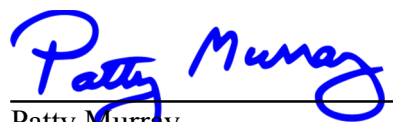
We are also concerned by reports that VA research studies may now have to be approved by political appointees before publication in academic journals. Please clarify to Congress, VA research employees, and veterans that no political appointees will be involved in approving or censoring the publication of research studies. Such clarification will support the historically bipartisan nature of VA research and help assure current and future VA researchers that VA will not censor the work of the talented staff it employs.

Scientific research takes years to build, and it cannot be treated like a spigot – turned on and off at will to serve the Trump Administration’s efforts to balance the budget on the backs of veterans. The consequences of your hiring freeze – and the resulting backlog in hiring VA research staff – could be severe and long-lasting. You still have the chance to correct course by immediately rehiring wrongly terminated researchers, working with OPM to quickly address the backlog in research staff hiring, coordinating with other agencies to restore all grants revoked from VA researchers, and assuring current and future VA researchers that their research will not be subject to political review.

We appreciate your attention to this critical issue and stand ready to support swift efforts that will allow VA research to thrive once more and continue to improve veteran health outcomes.

Sincerely,


Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator


Patty Murray
United States Senator


Ruben Gallego
United States Senator