

JON TESTER, MONTANA  
CHAIRMAN  
PATTY MURRAY, WASHINGTON  
BERNARD SANDERS, VERMONT  
SHERROD BROWN, OHIO  
RICHARD BLUMENTHAL, CONNECTICUT  
MAZIE HIRONO, HAWAII  
JOE MANCHIN III, WEST VIRGINIA  
KYRSTEN SINEMA, ARIZONA  
MAGGIE HASSAIN, NEW HAMPSHIRE  
TONY McCLAIN, STAFF DIRECTOR

# United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

JERRY MORAN, KANSAS  
RANKING MEMBER  
JOHN BOOZMAN, ARKANSAS  
BILL CASSIDY, LOUISIANA  
MIKE ROUNDS, SOUTH DAKOTA  
THOM TILLIS, NORTH CAROLINA  
DAN SULLIVAN, ALASKA  
MARSHA BLACKBURN, TENNESSEE  
KEVIN CRAMER, NORTH DAKOTA  
TOMMY TUBERVILLE, ALABAMA  
JON TOWERS, STAFF DIRECTOR

July 18, 2022

The Honorable Denis R. McDonough  
Secretary of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Ave, NW  
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Mr. Secretary,

Last year, I strongly supported your decision to initiate a Strategic Review of the Electronic Health Record Modernization (EHRM) program. That review resulted in important findings and recommendations. While some have been fully implemented, others have not. We both recognize significant and difficult work remains across every part of this program to ensure the technology allows Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) dedicated medical professionals to deliver high quality, safe, and timely care to veterans. Right now, that is not happening consistently for those using the technology and it is clear that further reforms are needed. Most importantly, I believe it is critical that you move the current Office of Functional Champion (OFC) from its current location within the EHRM Integration Office to the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) as a direct report to the Under Secretary for Health.

The Oracle Cerner EHR is arguably the most important health information technology system for VHA and its more than 350,000 employees responsible for delivering health care to veterans. If and when it is fully deployed, it will be used by all medical personnel to help deliver care and maintain facility operations – every day. For a variety of reasons, since the restructuring of the overall EHRM program as result of the Strategic Review, the position of the OFC Executive Director has been vacant or with acting leadership for nearly the entire time. A lack of a permanent OFC Executive Director and the location of this office outside of VHA is weakening the intent and effectiveness of this key recommendation from your Strategic Review – a recommendation based on industry best practices as outlined in the April 2021 Functional Champion report.

In addition to shifting the location of this office and ensuring a well-qualified permanent OFC leadership team is in place, I ask that you direct the Acting Under Secretary for Health to take additional steps to strengthen this OFC office so that it can provide strong corporate VHA oversight, coordination, and input into all aspects of the EHRM deployment. Its immediate top focus must be continuous patient safety monitoring and strengthening hospital operations at facilities using the new EHR. This direction to the Acting Under Secretary should include the provision of appropriate personnel and budget to establish and maintain operations for this office. As you know, the EHRM program was initiated in 2017. As it evolved, VHA was insufficiently engaged or excluded from various key decisions, planning, and other activities across the entire program. As your Strategic Review and other external reviews identified, this

contributed to a cascade of problems that continue to impact the Department, employees, and veterans. My recommendations above would take important steps to help fix these issues.

Finally, a Senate-confirmed Under Secretary for Health has not been in place since 2017, essentially for the entire life of the EHRM program. While President Biden nominated Dr. Shereef Elnahal on March 10, 2022, and our Committee reported his nomination favorably and unanimously on May 4, 2022, his expedited confirmation continues to be blocked by one of my Senate colleagues. Please know that I remain committed to doing everything I can to advance this critical nomination as quickly as possible.

I appreciate your consideration of the above organizational changes which I believe are critical to support the employees who deliver care to our nation's veterans. Additional actions are needed to improve this program but this is one that can have an immediate and important impact.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jon Tester". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Jon Tester  
Chairman