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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 9, 2018

Peter O'Rourke
Chief of Staff of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Chief of Staff O'Rourke,

We received a copy of your memo dated February 28, 2018, with updated guidance for hiring at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). We are very concerned with the process outlined in this memo, and the impact it will have on veterans seeking care and benefits at VA facilities across the country. We urge you to reconsider your decision to institute additional bureaucratic layers of approval for hiring frontline employees necessary to the operation of facilities that veterans count on for their care.

Prior to this updated guidance, VA had been operating under a Secretary memo from March 13, 2017 which outlined 166 occupational series that were able to be hired by local facilities without having to jump through additional hoops. Your decision significantly limited that ability to only the approximately 31 positions designated as mission critical occupations and those positions for which VA has been delegated direct hire authority by OPM.

VA facilities already face significant challenges in recruiting and retaining employees. In our home states, facilities struggle to meet demand for clinical care, for processing of claims, and even for getting a call answered at a call center. In many instances, rather than waiting for this process to be complete, potential employees can simply find a more lucrative opportunity to do similar work in the private sector. Unfortunately, your decision to require Under Secretary level approval in Washington, D.C. for each individual hire makes VA likely to lose qualified candidates.

We are seriously concerned by the impacts of this policy on access to services and care on veterans in our home states. Further, your own 2017 VHA Mission Critical Occupations Report cites significant issues with burnout indicators in some of your most critical occupations. Making it more difficult to fill vacancies pushes additional work onto already exhausted and overworked employees, making it more likely that they, too, will leave VA.

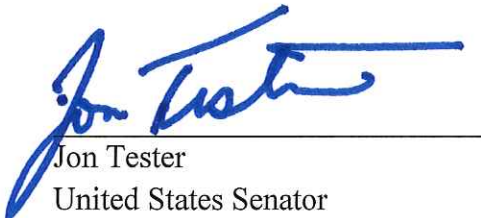
If this is, in fact, a result of your “current budget posture,” as indicated in your memo, please provide the amounts necessary to fully staff VA’s current 33,000 vacancies. In a climate where VA facilities are having to compete for resources with private providers, it’s critical that VA facilities are not limited or slowed down in their ability to hire positions so that they are truly able to maintain the high quality care necessary to be able to care for veterans. We further request the following information:

- Under this new process, how many days does it take to provide approval, or how much time has been added to the average completion time of a hiring package?
- How many current vacancies that require a waiver are occupations that have frequent contact with veteran patients or beneficiaries?
- How are you determining whether veterans are harmed or delayed in getting resolution of their issues based on these new processes?
- How have you communicated this policy to the field?
- Have you discussed this guidance with labor representatives?

Finally, we request information about your intended outcome of this process. While we are certain that there may be positions across the enterprise that may not need to be filled, it is disturbing to think that VA may be disadvantaging its own facilities in order to push more veteran care into the private sector.

We look forward to learning about the impacts of this process on veterans, on your existing workforce, and how much money is necessary, above the budget request, to fill all vacant positions.

Sincerely,



Jon Tester
United States Senator



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



Sherrod Brown
United States Senator



Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator