

**** OPENING STATEMENT ****

- I want to thank our witnesses for being here today.
- VA's recent efforts to expand telehealth options deserve a lot of praise.
- The Department has prioritized the health and wellbeing of its patients while working to keep its workforce safe. For that, it should be commended.
- However, a 750 percent increase in daily telehealth appointments, as of May, has not been without its challenges.
- Today's hearing offers us an opportunity to take stock of where VA is now, and to discuss further steps that can be made to improve the care provided to veterans.
- I want to hear directly from VA - the nation's largest integrated health care system – about the challenges it is facing and what it is doing to address them.
- In Montana many vets – especially those in highly rural areas – are accustomed to virtual appointments.
- But we need to remember that not all veterans have access to smart telephone technology or reliable internet access.
- To address these technological shortcomings, I know VA has conducted nearly 6 million more telephone appointments with veterans when compared to the same period last year.

- What more can we be doing to make these visits more valuable for patients and providers?
- And how are providers coping with a change in practice? We need to ensure that VA staff feel supported and have the tools they need to adequately care for vets.
- We especially need management to work with employees in good faith to hear what the folks on the ground think about virtual or telephone care and what suggestions they have for improvements.
- That effort by VA leadership will pay off greatly – particularly when the health care system is experiencing increased demand, and has a staff at-risk of burning out as the coronavirus pandemic continues to rage.
- As VA begins to re-open certain service lines in some facilities, it will be important to monitor the shift from telehealth appointments to in-person appointments.
- Many veterans may still feel uncomfortable seeing their providers face-to-face, and will want to continue to utilize telehealth services. We need to make sure the opportunity and resources for that ongoing care are available.
- And as hotspots and surges move from one location to another, VA's ability to expand and retract its telehealth capabilities will be critical.

- Therefore, it will be important to monitor whether the CARES Act funding is adequate to meet ongoing telehealth demand or if successor COVID packages will need to include additional emergency funding to provide these services to veterans.
- And we will need a good accounting of where appropriated funds are being spent in order to make informed decisions on a path forward.
- I want to again thank the VA team for taking part in this conversation today and I look forward to this important discussion.