

United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

TONY McCLAIN, STAFF DIRECTOR

October 23, 2025

The Honorable Gene Dodaro
Comptroller General of the United States
Government Accountability Office
441 G Street NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro,

The Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) system of care for veterans with spinal cord injuries, disorders, and diseases (SCI/D) is a critical component of VA's health care system, leveraging highly specialized staff to provide high quality care for veterans with some of the highest levels of health care need. VA direct care is widely considered the best health care provider for veterans and has helped extend the lifespan of veterans with SCI/D by decades. As such, I am deeply concerned about the impact VA Secretary Doug Collins' attacks on the Department's personnel are having on the integral, already understaffed SCI/D workforce.

According to Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA), VA should be operating roughly 990 SCI/D beds, yet, due to staffing shortages, the current number of operational beds has shrunk to 639. PVA also reported that, as of July 2025, VA was short 896 of the 2475 acute care nurses (thirty-six percent) and 23 of the 311 long-term care nurses (seven percent) recommended for adequately staffing its SCI/D system of care. Though staffing shortages among VA SCI/D staff are not new, veteran and caregiver testimony from a September 17, 2025, Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs hearing raised concerns regarding increased shortages resulting from Secretary Collins' hiring freeze, staffing caps, and other attacks on the VA workforce. Despite the concerns raised by veterans and caregivers experiencing these shortages firsthand, VA witnesses at this hearing refused to answer even the simplest of questions regarding SCI/D staffing – obstructing Congressional oversight and renegeing on promises of transparency.

Because the Department refuses to provide Congress and veterans with information on the status of VA's SCI/D system of care under the Trump Administration, I write to ask the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to complete an independent audit focusing on the following:

- Staffing shortages among VA SCI/D staff – including providers, nurses, social workers, and recreational therapists – since January 2025, including an assessment of the impacts VA's hiring freeze, probationary firings, staffing caps, deferred resignation program, and staff demoralization have had on SCI/D staffing.
- VA SCI/D staff being asked to provide coverage for other service lines experiencing staffing shortages, thereby exacerbating SCI/D's own staffing shortages.
- Changes in the number of operational VA SCI/D beds since January 2025.
- VA's delays in implementing Title I, Subtitle B of Public Law 118-210, the Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act, and how these delays have impacted veterans with SCI/D.

I look forward to working with GAO to conduct oversight on this important issue. If you have any questions about this request, please do not hesitate to contact my Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs staff.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Richard Blumenthal". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Richard" and last name "Blumenthal" clearly legible.

Richard Blumenthal
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs