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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 31, 2014

The Honorable Robert A. McDonald
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonald:

I want to thank you for your recent visit to Vermont and New Hampshire to speak at the University of Vermont College of Medicine and Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center to encourage medical and nursing students to pursue careers at the Department of Veterans Affairs. I know that since your confirmation at the end of July you have made nearly a dozen similar visits to medical schools and hospitals in order to recruit top medical professionals into the VA so the department can fulfill its mission of providing timely, high-quality health care to our nation's veterans. If the VA is going to be the strong and excellent health care system our veterans deserve, we must attract the best and brightest medical and nursing students into the department.

As these visits indicate, you came into your position as Secretary, in part, because veterans and the American people want to make certain that veterans are not placed on long waiting lists for access to VA health care. As we now know, a lack of doctors and other medical personnel at the department was one of several reasons that the VA was failing to treat veterans in a timely manner. I want to take this opportunity to thank you and your team for aggressively addressing this issue.

I appreciate that in the last several months, the VA has reached out to more than 310,000 veterans to get them off wait lists and in for appointments. This is certainly a step in the right direction. I am also pleased that in those areas where VA facilities lack the capability to provide timely care to veterans, the VA has referred 300,000 more veterans for private care than in this same period last year. These two factors mean we are making significant progress in making certain that veterans are now being seen for treatment in a more appropriate amount of time. However, I am sure you agree with me that there is much more work to be done to achieve our goal of ensuring veterans receive the timely, high-quality care they need and deserve.

As you know, every member of the U.S. Senate believes that those VA employees who lied or manipulated data and further exacerbated veterans' inability to access health care must be held accountable for their actions. In my view, the VA must act as aggressively as possible in removing those officials from their positions. Clearly, we do not want the VA making decisions that will slow down our efforts to achieve that goal. As I understand it, there are ongoing investigations by the Office of Inspector General, the Department of Justice and/or Office of Special Counsel that must be completed before disciplinary actions can be taken. While we want the VA to act in a timely manner to punish employees who have acted dishonorably, it is imperative that the VA get these personnel actions right – by building an effective case to do so. The last thing we want is to undermine law enforcement's efforts to complete their work as well.

Thanks for the hard work you have shown the nation in the months you have been Secretary. I look forward to continuing to work with you to make certain that veterans get the timely, high quality health care and other benefits that they deserve.

Sincerely,



Bernard Sanders
Chairman