

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20510

August 30, 2013

The Honorable Eric K. Shinseki
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Shinseki,

We are writing to express our concern about the Government Accountability Office's (GAO) findings in *VA Benefits: Improvements Needed to Ensure Claimants Receive Appropriate Representation, August 2013*, and the state of VA's accreditation program.

In our continuing effort to address concerns related to individuals and organizations marketing financial planning services and products to veterans to enable them to qualify for pension benefits, we asked GAO to examine VA's accreditation program. We are deeply troubled by the findings indicating weaknesses in the accreditation program, which may prevent VA from ensuring that veterans are served by knowledgeable, qualified, and trustworthy representatives.

We believe there are immediate steps VA must take in order to improve the accreditation program. First, VA should inform veterans and other VA claimants about the current state of VA's accreditation program, including the weaknesses identified in GAO's report. Veterans and their families need to understand that, because of those deficiencies, due diligence is required even when selecting an accredited representative. VA should also take steps to highlight that VA accreditation would never imply that an individual should be trusted to provide financial planning services.

VA must also develop clear policies and supportive action plans to ensure successful implementation of policies needed to correct the deficiencies identified by GAO. For example, a clear definition of the requirement that an accredited individual have "good moral character" would be useful, especially if integrated into the audits and background checks that VA, in response to the GAO investigation, indicated it will implement for attorneys and agents applying for accreditation. Additionally, VA must identify a clear mechanism by which stakeholders can lodge complaints about accredited representatives allegedly engaging in improper behavior. This complaint system needs to be supported by written policies to ensure an appropriate series of actions are taken to respond to, monitor, and follow-up on complaints.

Based on GAO's findings, it also appears that a lack of staff dedicated to these efforts and appropriate technology are compounding the problems with the accreditation program. In that regard, VA should consider integrating the accreditation process into the electronic claims system. This could automate the process where possible, potentially reducing staffing burdens and complementing the ongoing efforts to transform the claims system.

We look forward to your response and to working with you to make this program function as intended.

Sincerely,



Bernard Sanders
Chairman, Veterans' Affairs Committee



Richard Burr
Ranking Member, Veterans' Affairs Committee



Patty Murray
Chairman, Budget Committee



Bill Nelson
Chairman, Special Committee on Aging