

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

November 18, 2024

The Honorable Jon Tester
Chairman
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Chairman Tester,

Just a few short months ago, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) notified Committee members of a looming \$3 billion shortfall that would prevent the Department from delivering benefit payments to veterans and their dependents by October 1, 2024, unless Congress provided the Department with an emergency supplemental appropriation. This announcement aroused significant and justified concern from our veterans, many of whom rely on these benefit payments to cover day-to-day expenses. It also highlighted a continued trend of gross mismanagement within the VA. The department has systematically restricted veterans from accessing health care in the community, has sent \$11 million in undeserved bonuses to top Department officials, and has failed to conduct accurate accounting and forecasting on basic budgetary items. Now, we have learned that the alleged \$2.883 billion shortfall did not exist. In fact, the VA ended Fiscal Year 2024 with a \$5.1 billion surplus. Whether by negligence or deceit, this is a stunning about-face that demands our attention.

In a September oversight hearing of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, titled "*Accountable or Absent?: Examining VA Leadership Under the Biden-Harris Administration*," the VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) testified to the pervasive lack of accountability within the VA. This lack extended to the handling of budgetary issues. The report focused predominantly on two Veterans Health Administration facilities – in Hampton, Virginia, and Aurora, Colorado – but it presents many troubling findings that are indicative of the wider issues plaguing the VA. OIG laid out numerous instances of misconduct, moments when leadership failed to take action, and examples of insufficient quality controls that "erode the foundational elements of accountability."¹ The testimony ultimately portrayed the culture of the VA as rife with distrust, conceit, and fear of retaliation.

We recognize that there are many excellent VA employees. They work diligently for the veterans they serve. However, it is clear that there are systemic issues severely undermining the VA's ability to deliver consistent, high-quality, and timely results for veterans. As the OIG writes, "The OIG recognizes that changing the culture of any organization takes time and sustained effort." It is high time that we take the necessary steps to change VA culture and make the VA accountable to the people it serves.

¹ Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Inspector General, Testimony before House Committee on Veterans Affairs. September 10, 2024.

During consideration of the *Veterans Benefits Continuity and Accountability Supplemental Appropriations Act*, 15 senators brought forward a very reasonable and necessary accountability measure, which would take proactive steps to improve the VA's culture. The Protecting Regular Order (PRO) for Veterans Act is critical legislation. It would provide greater oversight of the VA and hold the Department accountable for mismanagement of taxpayer dollars. This legislation requires quarterly in-person budget briefings from the Secretary of the VA to the Senate and House Committees on Appropriations and Veterans' Affairs for a three-year period, specifically presenting information on any shortfall the Department may be experiencing. As the Senate Committee tasked with direct oversight of the VA, it is essential that we hear directly from the Department's leadership and receive immediate and honest answers. Only through greater transparency and direct communication can we begin to improve the culture of the VA.

Additionally, in the event of a budget shortfall, the PRO for Veterans Act prohibits the VA and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) from providing bonuses to any senior executive employees in the Department's Central Office. Under no circumstances should federal employees be rewarded for the irresponsible management of American taxpayer dollars. The VA's mismanagement caused significant stress on veterans who rely on these benefits, and our veterans deserve stability and accountability from VA employees.

We are very pleased to hear that the House is considering legislation that will better support veterans as they access their health benefits and services. However, Congress should not expand the authority of the VA while the Department is still unable to manage its existing authorities without guardrails. We must include the PRO for Veterans Act, or something similar that creates accountability for the VA, in any moving legislation. The need for this bill was made clear in September, and the VA's continued mismanagement makes it all the more critical that we immediately impose greater transparency and accountability measures on this Department.

Sincerely,



Dan Sullivan
United States Senator



Charles E. Grassley
United States Senator



Bill Cassidy
United States Senator



Roger Wicker
United States Senator



Thom Tillis
United States Senator



Steve Daines
United States Senator



Joni K. Ernst
United States Senator



Deb Fischer
United States Senator



Thomas H. Tuberville
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Roger Marshall, M.D.
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Kevin Cramer
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