

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

October 27, 2015

The Honorable Robert A. McDonald
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, Northwest
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary McDonald:

Recruiting and retaining a strong workforce at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is critical for VA to carry out its mandate of caring for the nation's veterans. Earlier this month, VA's Office of Inspector General (IG) released its updated list of the five largest occupational shortages for clinical staff at the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). While the focus of the IG report is on clinical staff shortages, the IG highlighted the fact that VHA ranked human resource (HR) officers third among critically needed staff—administrative and clinical positions combined. In fact, data received from VA on September 18, 2015, indicates there are 903 vacancies for critical HR positions across VHA.

An independent assessment of VA's health care delivery system and management processes published in September revealed that the length of time it takes for VA to hire priority positions stretches for months, and the process is not user-friendly to applicants. HR is expected to fill a position within 60 calendar days, 80 percent of the time, but process requirements, even if perfectly executed, take about 49 to 62 days. VA officials note that it takes an average of about 61 days to hire HR staff from the time a position is posted. Further, after HR staff is hired, the training necessary for personnel to be ready to fulfil the full responsibilities of the position results in further delays in having a fully functioning HR team in place to hire critically needed health care providers.

The independent assessment further revealed systematic HR challenges that need to be addressed through a transformation of the HR function. Such a transformation will require redesigning key processes—including hiring—and shifting the focus of HR staff from compliance to effectiveness. In addition, VA's current HR function is not meeting the recruiting requirements of the VA Medical Centers due to the length of the hiring process. The assessment led to a recommendation that VA begin an effort in the next 12 months to transform the HR function to be more responsive to meeting the needs of VAMC leadership, more efficient, and more customer service-focused. We support this recommendation to transform the hiring process, which must begin with ensuring that VA has appropriate HR staffing levels in place to execute the work.

Given human resource officers have an essential role in hiring critical clinical staff vacant positions in human resources present a greater problem for facilities when it comes to overall recruitment across all VA facilities. The clinical occupations for which VA has identified shortages are typically in-demand in the wider community as well, so without the necessary HR staff in place, VA risks missed opportunities to hire promising candidates who can easily find employment outside the VA. Delays in filling critical clinical staff positions could also impact veterans' ability to access quality care in a timely way. VA cannot expect to address its clinician shortage issue until it has the HR staff and systems in place to carry out proper recruitment and hiring.

We urge you to expeditiously build the HR professional team needed to conduct the recruitment and hiring functions VA so desperately needs to address the shortage of clinical personnel. Filling the backlog of HR staff vacancies and transforming the hiring process is a complex undertaking; however, it is essential to ensure the health of VHA's own workforce—and ultimately, the health of our veterans. Therefore, we ask you to provide us with a detailed plan for developing a strengthened HR workforce not later than January 25, 2016.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We look forward to working with you to address this shortage.

Sincerely,



Richard Blumenthal
Ranking Member
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee



Corrine Brown
Ranking Member
House Veterans' Affairs Committee