

United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

January 20, 2021

President Joseph R. Biden
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President,

I write to congratulate you on your inauguration as the 46th President of the United States. I look forward to working with you and your Administration, particularly as it relates to caring for those who have served our nation in uniform. As you well know from your own family's experience, there is no greater calling in government than to honor the service of the men and women who volunteered to keep us free. The presence of young men and women from all around the country providing security in and around the Capitol complex for your inauguration is a somber reminder of their sacrifice and our obligation to them.

As Chairman and soon-to-be Ranking Member of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I want to make you aware of not only the key accomplishments that have been made over the last several years for veterans, but also the challenges ahead. The job of your nominee to be Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Denis McDonough, is a significant one. VA is in the midst of the greatest transformational change since the end of World War II, a change occurring during the worst pandemic in over 100 years. As he and I briefly discussed, passing laws is the easy part. Faithful execution of those laws is what will ultimately improve the lives of veterans in Kansas and all across the country.

Access to health care, particularly for veterans in rural states like Kansas, has been one of my foremost priorities for over two decades as a member of Congress. The issue of access came to a head after the nationwide wait-time scandal in 2014 when veterans died while waiting for care. That scandal culminated in a temporary program of choice for veterans under President Obama, and then enactment of the bipartisan MISSION Act of 2018. MISSION gave veterans the permanent choice to utilize community providers for their health care when it made sense for them and NOT when it was convenient for VA bureaucrats. Rather than hours-long drives or interminable waits for a VA appointment, veterans now can access a network of community providers under certain reasonable circumstances. VA provides excellent health care, but MISSION provided veterans with a long overdue remedy to the reality that VA facilities in many states are far from where they live, don't provide the specific care they need, or simply don't have the capacity to offer a timely appointment. I ask you to build on this common-sense notion that it's the veteran who should be at the center of their health care decisions.

The MISSION Act also expanded VA's program of comprehensive caregiver assistance to family caregivers of veterans who served prior to September 11, 2001. Put simply, family caregivers give veterans yet another choice. Rather than be cared for in a nursing home they can have a loved one care for them in the comfort of their homes. This program makes that choice easier, but the expansion has only been in effect for four months. Again, I ask that you prioritize implementation of this law for our veterans and build on its promise for veterans in need of caregiver assistance.

My highest priority during my first year as Chairman was veterans' mental health and suicide. Our bipartisan effort on this front culminated in enactment of the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act. A core provision of that Act recognizes the reality that of the 20 veterans who commit suicide each day (on average) only 6 recently accessed VA health care prior to their deaths. To reach the 70 percent of veterans whom VA has no contact with, the Hannon Act authorizes VA to grant funds to specialized community organizations which are better positioned to reach veterans in crisis where VA cannot. This important law will be implemented during your Administration and its success could be the difference between life and death.

Mr. President, I have only touched on a few of the important items facing our veterans. We, of course, have much more to do. Reducing disability claims and appeals backlogs, adding flexibility to the GI Bill and orienting it towards successful employment outcomes for veterans, improving transition assistance for those leaving the military, helping veterans exposed to toxic substances during military service, continuing to make VA more welcoming to women veterans, modernizing VA's aging infrastructure, holding VA employees accountable for their performance, and fulfilling the promise of an integrated electronic health record – these are but a few of the other major issues for which your Administration will be accountable. You have my pledge to be a partner in that effort.

Once again, congratulations on your inauguration, and thank you for your commitment to our nation's veterans. Caring for our nation's veterans has always been a unifying force during my time in Congress. It is my great hope that it will continue to be under your Presidency.

Sincerely,



Jerry Moran
Chairman