

United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 9, 2018

The Honorable Robert Wilkie
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Mr. Secretary,

Congratulations once again on your confirmation as Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Your focus, as you know, must be on ways to better provide veterans with the timely and quality healthcare and benefits they have earned, and you must ensure that VA's frontline employees have the appropriate tools and knowledge to carry out that mission.

We are concerned that many of the actions taken by VA in the time between your departure from the Acting Secretary role and your swearing-in as Secretary were planned and executed to serve political interests and agendas, rather than to serve the best interests of veterans. Several initiatives and actions moved forward without guidance and direction from any officials serving in Senate-confirmed leadership positions. However, as evidenced by the broad bipartisan support for your confirmation, we believe you have the faith and confidence of the Senate to lead the Department based on the values you expressed in multiple Member meetings and in your confirmation hearing. We want you to succeed, and veterans need you to succeed. For that to happen, you will need to right the ship at VA by reassuring the nonpartisan career employees that their institutional knowledge and dedication is valued, and by ensuring that everyone under your direction operates with one principle in mind – to serve the nation's veterans and not anyone's political interests.

Specifically, we ask you to review the following actions, as we strongly believe you should maintain the ability to make each of these decisions. During your review, we ask that you consider the long term impact of each decision on veteran services.

- Selection of Key Senior Leaders: Prior to your arrival, unconfirmed appointees selected and on boarded a new Principal Deputy under Secretary of Health. We believe this individual, while possibly very qualified, was brought on board without your input. In doing so, VA displaced a long-time career employee who had been serving as Executive in Charge, and who had the faith and confidence of VHA employees. We further believe this should have been a decision you were able to make upon your confirmation. We also believe the selection of an Assistant Secretary for Information & Technology should not have been moved forward by VA until you were in place. We hope you had the opportunity to interview the nominee in advance of his selection.

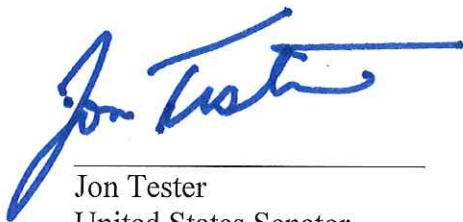
- Execution of Executive Orders Related to Labor: Acting leadership of the Department did not set you up for success in your relationships with employees by rushing the execution of the recent Executive Orders. According to briefings from VA staff, many aspects of these orders were carried out based on guidance from the Acting Secretary and the front office. And putting hundreds of VA employees into questionable status prior to your arrival is not operating in good faith. Acting leadership could have made the necessary preparations for such an EO, but should have waited for your approval before moving forward.
- Damage Key Relationship with Office of Inspector General: As has been previously reported and discussed, the Acting Secretary, in your absence, sent an inappropriate communication to the Inspector General (IG), intimating that the IG is not an independent body and works for and reports to the Secretary of the Department. That is patently false. The Senate subsequently took a unanimous vote to uphold the independence of the IG. We urge you to take steps to repair this relationship, and to confirm that you recognize and value the independence of the IG and any attempted interference, including withholding information, is unacceptable.
- Elimination of Institutional Knowledge in Key Positions: Prior to you being sworn-in as Secretary, there were significant changes made to the staffing of your personal office. This included the dismantling of teams, reassignments based solely on perceived loyalties, and the elimination of all career civil servants at SES or GS-15 levels from your immediate office. Clearly, you should have a say in the staff working directly for you, but you were not given that opportunity. Additionally, while settling in and learning about the scope and magnitude of this job, it would have been beneficial to have career employees – whose loyalties are to veterans rather than political agendas – surrounding you, who know the job and have served multiple prior Secretaries, and who could ultimately help you accomplish your objectives. We urge you to meet with these dedicated public servants and consider for yourself whether their knowledge of the processes and relationships across the Department might be helpful to you, and consider recalling their reassignments. Further, significant changes were dictated to the incoming Under Secretary for Benefits by the same team that dismantled your immediate office personnel. We urge you also to review whether these moves were political in nature and could have negative impacts on institutional knowledge about the programs within VBA.

There will be real impacts for veterans based on the rushed changes in advance of your arrival. For example, the forcing out of two key employees at the Center for Women veterans has already resulted in significantly fewer outreach opportunities to engage with this growing population, which could lead to increased rates of health issues and possibly to increased numbers of suicides in this cohort.

Finally, we encourage you to recall the commitment you made in your confirmation hearing to do what is best for veterans, even if it is in disagreement with others in the Administration. It is clear now that direction is often coming to VA from voices who are outside the Department, who may have financial interests in the contracting decisions made, and who have not been entrusted to make decisions, through election to office or confirmation by the Senate, on behalf of this nation's veterans. You must reject private interference and influence on your important and bipartisan work. Decisions must be made by Senate-confirmed leadership based on what is in the best interest of veterans. As Secretary, our nation's veterans are counting on you to safeguard them and the Department from inappropriate engagement from outside individuals.

We urge you in the strongest possible terms to take your cues from veterans, and ensure that you are getting advice and input from career civil servants as well as political appointees. In order to make the best, most informed decisions, you will need significant input from a variety of experienced sources, and fostering an environment in which dissenting views and alternative opinions are welcome is absolutely critical. With that in mind, a review of the above actions to determine that they are in line with your best judgement for veterans would be greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,



Jon Tester
United States Senator



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



Sherrod Brown
United States Senator



Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator



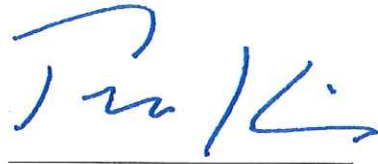
Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator



Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senator



Mazie Hirono
United States Senator



Tim Kaine
United States Senator



Tom Udall
United States Senator



Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



Bill Nelson
United States Senator



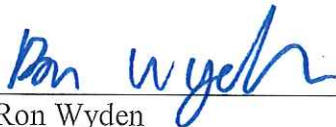
Brian Schatz
United States Senator



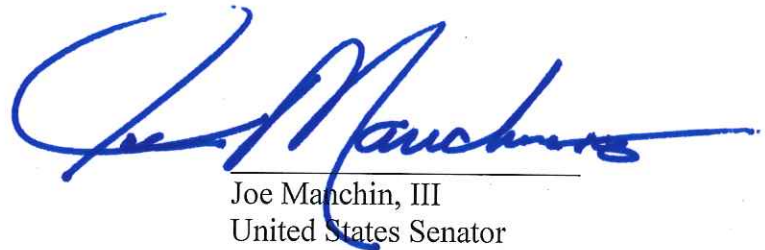
Mark Warner
United States Senator



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



Ron Wyden
United States Senator



Joe Manchin, III
United States Senator