

**** OPENING STATEMENT ****

- Dr. Stone, thank you and your team for being here today.
- And thank you to the VA front line employees for all they've done to care for veterans, and non-veterans, during this pandemic.
- We owe it to all of them to strengthen the VA for the next wave of COVID-19 and future emergencies.
- Many Americans, including myself, were shocked and angry when we saw that hospitals around the country, including VA clinics and hospitals, were running out of critical medical supplies.
- At VA, the Department moved to PPE austerity measures in April when the supply chain dried up – at that time not all staff were guaranteed a mask.
- Even now, we're hearing that many personnel are being asked to re-use their masks. That has to change.
- This problem was compounded by the fact that we didn't have the capacity to produce those supplies quickly here at home.
- And I'm glad that we have some folks from industry on the second panel who can shed some light on how to increase that capacity.

- For the sake of our national security, our economy, and the health of our people, we need the capability to produce a larger amount of vital medical supplies - here at home - and to have a system that meets the needs of every American community.
- But while we work on that, we need to address the immediate needs of the VA and the veterans they serve.
- We need to understand how VA is currently operating its supply chain, and what steps are needed to improve its responsiveness, and where Congress can help.
- Is VA getting all the support it needs from private industry, from FEMA, from HHS, and everyone else involved? In the last few months, that answer is NO.
- We need everyone working in the same direction, with the same goals. And we need to make sure VA and the veterans they serve have a seat at the table where the decisions are being made.
- It seems to me like some people in the Federal government forgot or didn't know that VA is the largest integrated health care system in the country - with more than 6 million active users, 170 hospitals, more than 1000 clinics, and hundreds of thousands of employees.
- At the highest levels, the Trump Administration took a hands-off approach to managing the medical supply needs during COVID-19.

- And it left VA, state, local and tribal governments, and everyone else trying to out-bid each other for scarce supplies. There is no “whole-of-government” approach to fighting this virus. That’s a problem.
- The pandemic has shed light on challenges VA already had with its procurement and logistics systems. Much of it seems to be a pieced-together set of outdated IT systems and processes.
- They didn’t work that well before COVID-19, and they certainly didn’t work well in the middle of a pandemic.
- VA would like to speed up some of the programs it has with DOD related to their supply chain management, including adopting DOD’s logistics systems.
- And while that sounds good, we need to know what structures, leadership teams and staff, and plans VA has in place to manage the execution of these systems. And we need to know the costs and the trade-offs.
- VA is already trying to replace its electronic health record and its financial management system – both 10-year, multi-billion dollar high-risk projects.
- I’ll look forward to hearing VA’s perspective on whether its workforce can handle yet-another huge IT project.
- GAO has tracked these and other similar efforts across government, especially large IT and acquisition project

failures. We need to know if VA is on the right path and if they are not, how do we get it there.

- Dr. Stone, as you know, at the outset of the nation's response to COVID-19, Congress fulfilled VA's request for nearly \$20 billion to support its ability to take care of veterans.
- With that funding, is the Department actually able to find and procure needed PPE from private industry?
- Most importantly, I want to be sure that whatever solutions VA comes up with, PPE is spread equitably across the VA. Whether in a VA medical center in New Orleans or a CBOC in Kalispell - all staff deserve to have the equipment to keep them safe.
- Dr. Stone, I commend your ongoing efforts to provide veterans with the high-quality care they deserve, and I look forward to our conversation.