

****OPENING STATEMENT****

- Mr. Chairman thank you for holding today's hearing.
- While I am looking forward to the discussion among our panel of witnesses, I am disappointed the Administration chose not to participate in this important dialogue.
- The Committee has serious issues to address with the Administration about implementation of the VA MISSION Act – it's unfortunate VA couldn't be here to participate in finding solutions to those problems.
- When Congress creates programs to benefit veterans and their families, the expectation is the Administration will implement those programs as Congress intended.
- With creation of the VA MISSION Act, Congress sought to provide veterans with greater options for community care when the Department could not provide care in a timely manner or when veterans were forced to travel long distances to a VA facility.
- The latest data we have from VA shows that it made more than 4.1 million referrals into the community from the beginning of Fiscal Year 2020 to June. Nationally, it took VA nearly 22 days to schedule health care services in the community after a request was made. That's a problem.

- Veterans shouldn't have to wait for VA to navigate a bureaucratic process before their appointments are scheduled. Then veterans wait an average of 20 days for their appointments after they have been scheduled.
- If VA was here I would tell them to find a way to reduce that red tape.
- The Administration needs to explain how it plans to bring down the number of days it takes internally to get veterans to the point where they get scheduled for care in the community. In the last year there has not been much improvement in this timeline.
- Rather than sticking with this broken process, the Administration must figure out a better path forward.
- I have a bill, the Accountability in Department of Veterans Affairs Scheduling and Consult Management Act, which passed out of Committee in August. It would help VA do just that. It would require VA to take a hard look at its scheduling process and then report how long it takes to get through that process. It would also require scheduling audits and a review of the grading of positions involved in scheduling because too often personnel leave these important jobs for better opportunities elsewhere in VA.
- My bill would also help veterans make better-informed decisions on where they get care because they would have the information they need to make those decisions. It

would also help Congress exercise oversight of VA scheduling to make sure the community care program is working as we intended.

- Another area deserving of scrutiny is the newly expanded Caregivers program. While it has the potential to vastly improve the lives of veterans and their caregivers, many of whom have waited years to receive the same stipends, training, and mental health services that have been available to post-9/11 veterans and their caregivers, I am concerned the Administration too narrowly wrote the rules on eligibility.
- Modifications that tighten eligibility for the current and expanded Program are not MISSION Act-driven and were undertaken solely by the Administration in an effort to limit eligibility for this Program.
- I am also concerned that the Administration, in a rush to meet a new self-imposed deadline after missing the mark by a year, spent little time preparing stakeholders for when the program would actually go live causing confusion when it actually did.
- I want to thank the Elizabeth Dole Foundation for being here today to shed light on these issues so we can make sure this program is functioning well for veterans and their caregivers.

- Mr. Chairman, thank you again for calling this important hearing.