

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 18, 2018

Peter O'Rourke
Acting Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Acting Secretary O'Rourke,

Serving Veterans must always transcend politics and personal agendas. The Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) mission is carried out every day by civil servants of all backgrounds, creeds, and political affiliations who do just that. It appears, however, that you may have chosen to put politics ahead of veterans' needs and that is shameful.

Making determinations about an individual's employment status based on blind political loyalty is wholly unacceptable – it runs contrary to how the Department has always been run and it is a complete disservice to the veterans of this country. They deserve better. You are serving in a temporary position – one for which you have not been confirmed. Using this short-term appointment to install more political loyalists within the Department while wantonly reassigning, demoting and removing countless nonpartisan career employees who have served multiple prior administrations is reckless. Reports are particularly troubling that you and a number of other political appointees – none of whom have been confirmed – are aggressively carrying out these efforts in an apparent attempt to preempt the arrival of a new VA Secretary. We therefore demand that you immediately cease the reassignment, demotion, and removal of any career employees within the Office of the Secretary, or career employees at Senior SES and GS levels in staff offices and administrations so that these matters can be more appropriately addressed by someone who has the full faith of the Senate to execute such actions.

The nomination of Robert Wilkie to serve as VA Secretary was passed out of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs by voice vote and with broad bipartisan support. In his confirmation hearing and in numerous bipartisan meetings with Members of the United States Senate, Mr. Wilkie has confirmed his belief that political loyalty should not play a role in hiring or accountability decisions. Once confirmed by the Senate, and in place at VA, he should have the ability to make decisions for himself related to reorganization or reallocation of employee resources.

By your own admission in testimony on July 17, 2018, in front of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, the reassignments you directed during the six short weeks you have been Acting Secretary were not based on poor performance. Information provided to the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs by employees who have been the subject of these reassignments and demotions, and those who have resigned rather than accept reassignment or removal, leads us to believe that these individuals are being punished for not expressing loyalty to the current administration, or for questioning programs or policies before their enactment.

Given the press release issued by VA on April 25, 2018, which stated that employees who were “not on board with this administration’s policies or pace of change have now departed VA,” we are extremely concerned that perceived political loyalties are playing a leading role in your decisions to remove employees who may have beneficial institutional knowledge of great value to the delivery of care, benefits and services to veterans and their families. We believe it is absolutely critical that career employees within the organization are empowered to raise issues that, based on their experience, may ultimately create better programs and outcomes for veterans. The voices of those who have dedicated their careers in direct service to veterans must be heard, regardless of any allegations of their political leanings. We remind you that VA serves all the veterans of this nation, not a single political group or agenda. And those who work there should not be beholden to loyalty pledges or partisan ploys.

For that reason, we reiterate our demand that you immediately discontinue taking employment actions that are not based solely on poor performance, and that the actions you have taken in the past month be reversed. These decisions are being made by employees who have not been confirmed with the faith and confidence of the Senate and are clearly operating under the assumption that they will never be held accountable for their own actions. Subsequently, once confirmed by the Senate, the new VA Secretary should independently review each decision that was made with respect to the Secretary’s immediate staff, and make his own determinations.

Sincerely,



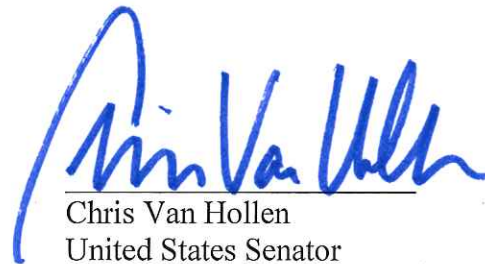
Jon Tester
United States Senator



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



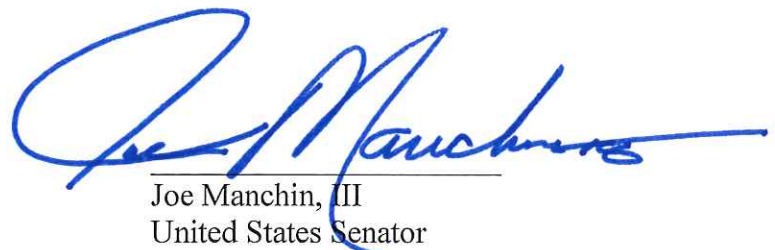
Richard J. Durbin
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Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator




Brian Schatz
United States Senator



Joe Manchin, III
United States Senator

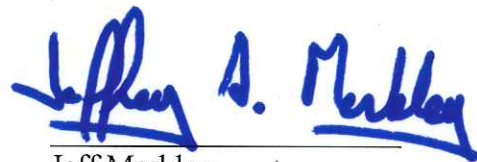

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