

**** OPENING STATEMENT ****

- Dr. Lieberman, I want to thank you and your team for being here today.
- I also want to thank VA's frontline employees for all they have done to care for veterans and non-veterans alike during this pandemic – especially now as VA's case count surges and staff are pushed to extremes.
- The staff – from providers to housekeepers to schedulers– are the backbone of VHA, and they work hard every day to make sure veterans get access to the high-quality care they have earned.
- I want to commend VA for its success in quickly and efficiently hiring thousands of new staff during COVID-19.
- It used to take at least 90 days to get new employees in the door. And in the meantime, some potential employees would be snatched up by other employers who could hire them sooner.
- So for VA to bring on new staff in just 72 hours – that shows what the Agency is actually capable of when it sets itself to the task.
- But it shouldn't take a pandemic for VA to fix some of its internal hiring processes when many of these changes could have been made years ago.

- Over the years, Congress has given the Department numerous hiring authorities. My concern is that VA is dragging its feet when it comes to implementing them—some authorities are several years old and VA has yet to put them to use.
- Beyond that, VA needs to make itself an employer of choice for health care professionals.
- And the first step is ensuring current staff feel supported.
- Our nation's health care workers are responding to one of the worst public health emergencies of our lifetime. That takes a toll.
- We need to keep bringing new folks onboard, while retaining the talented clinicians who have risked their lives to serve our veterans.
- A big part of making staff feel supported is to guarantee that they have access to the PPE and testing they need to do their jobs safely.
- And VA leadership must recognize the sacrifices staff are making by providing retention incentives and hazard pay where appropriate.

- I would also like to see the Department expand scholarship and training programs to help with recruitment and retention – especially in rural areas.
- We know that when a student trains at VA, they are more likely to return to work for VA.
- Recruiting and retaining staff also means treating the workforce with respect. That means listening to their concerns and acting on them.
- We especially need management to work with employee representatives in good faith.
- That effort by VA leadership will pay off greatly – particularly at a time when the health care system is experiencing increased demand and has a staff already at-risk of burning out as the coronavirus pandemic continues to rage.
- Most importantly, we must work to build a VA health workforce that is equipped to meet the needs of veterans throughout this pandemic and for generations to come.
- Dr. Lieberman, I look forward to hearing VA's plans for doing just that.