

U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON
VETERANS' AFFAIRS
CHAIRMAN JERRY MORAN

Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee Hearing:
Review of the FY2021 Budget and FY2022 Advance Appropriations
Request and Oversight of CARES Act Supplemental Appropriations for the
Department of Veterans Affairs

*Opening Statement Chairman Jerry Moran (R-Kan.)
Wednesday, June 3, 2020 | 3:00 p.m.*

As Prepared for Delivery:

Good morning, everyone. The committee will come to order. Today's hearing is on the VA's fiscal year 2021 budget request and the supplemental appropriations contained in the CARES Act to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak.

We welcome Secretary Robert Wilkie as well as Dr. Richard Stone, executive in charge of the Veterans' Health Administration, Dr. Paul Lawrence, Under Secretary for Benefits, and Jon Rychalski, Assistant Secretary for Management and Chief Financial Officer. I appreciate your presence today and look forward to discussing how we can work together to improve outcomes for veterans in our country.

Before we proceed to the topic of today's hearing, I would like to take a moment to recognize that last Monday was Memorial Day. As we should every day, we take time as a nation to pause and remember the brave Americans who gave their lives in defense of our country, and we honor the sacrifice they made to keep us free.

In that spirit, I want to acknowledge the passing of veterans and VA personnel who lost their lives due to COVID-19. Part of our discussion today is to make certain the VA has everything it needs to minimize the loss of life during these unprecedented times. I also want to thank VA nurses, doctors, and support staff who are working tirelessly to deliver care to veterans during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to serving veterans, the VA has executed its "fourth mission" to support the American health care systems struggling during this national emergency. The response from these health care professionals has been and continues to be admirable.

While the VA continues to devote resources to suppress the pandemic, veterans will continue to rely on VA for their needs, such as education, home financing, and transition services. To this end, the pursuit of the wellbeing of our nation's veterans must continue unabated.

Between the release of this budget and today's hearing, Congress passed legislation to support federal agencies responding to the COVID-19 emergency.

Following a supplemental appropriations request from the president, Congress passed the CARES Act, signed into law on March 27th.

CARES provides \$19.6 billion for medical services, including telehealth services, equipment and supplies, personal protective equipment, and emergency room and urgent care. CARES also sets aside \$2.2 billion for IT in order to increase telework capacity and other telehealth needs.

I am interested to learn how the COVID-19 emergency has affected VA health services and its budget. Retrospectively, did the CARES Act appropriate funds in the right places, and prospectively, given the shifting health care demands, does the president's fiscal year 2021 budget still address VHA's projected needs?

Released before the COVID-19 emergency, the president's fiscal year 2021 budget request includes a proposed increase of \$22.8 billion in funding for the VA for a total of \$243.4 billion. This represents a 10.2 percent increase above fiscal year 2020 enacted levels. I look forward to hearing from you how the proposed budgetary increase will create better outcomes for veterans.

I was pleased to see the budget request includes an increase for Medical Community Care as the VA continues to implement the MISSION Act. As we have discussed, many veterans, especially those in rural states like Kansas, depend on community care providers for access to timely, quality care. MISSION Act was a bipartisan effort to transform veterans' access to community care, it is strongly supported by every Veteran Service Organization and you have been a champion to ensure its proper implementation, Mr. Secretary. We all want veterans to receive the care they need through the VA or in their community, and I look forward to discussing the future of MISSION Act today.

Addressing another of the committee's health priorities, I appreciate the additional requested funding for mental health and suicide prevention services. I know you share this priority Mr. Secretary. In January, this committee unanimously reported the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act to provide targeted resources towards research, grants for community partners, and improved coordination between the Department of Defense and the VA to quell the rates of veterans who die by suicide.

It is my hope that you will continue working with us to get this bill signed into law.

Mr. Secretary, again, I thank you for being here. I appreciate the difficulty of your job as the administration works to find a whole-government solution to the pandemic. I look forward to hearing your views on the FY21 budget, and I now turn to my colleague and friend, the senator from Montana, Senator Tester, for opening remarks.

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