

Senator Blumenthal's Statement for the Record  
Veterans Affairs Conference Committee June 24, 2014

I thank Chairman Sanders and Chairman Miller and Ranking Members Burr and Michaud for their leadership. I also thank all of my colleagues here today for their remarkably bipartisan and cooperative approach, which bodes well for the continued work we must do to address the challenges facing VA hospitals.

Throughout my time in public service, both as a United States Senator and in state office, I have fought hard for veterans. A crucial part of my job is listening to what those veterans have to say. I have heard from many of them – including some of the 683 veterans in Connecticut who have waited more than three months to see a doctor, or those who have come home from Afghanistan and have to wait 18 days for an appointment to address post-traumatic stress disorder – and they have made clear to me that this is truly an emergency. In fact, it is an emergency that gives new meaning to that word. We have an obligation to honor their commitment to our nation by addressing this problem with adequate funding and necessary legislation.

Unfortunately, this tragedy continues to unfold, and day by day we learn more about its true dimensions. The Office of the Medical Inspector in the Department of Veterans Affairs dismissed significant concerns by stating – incorrectly – that they did not impact patient health. And in addition to issues of cooking the books and cover-ups, there are disturbing allegations of retaliations against whistleblowers. As a former prosecutor, I know that one of the most formidable barriers to institutional reform is the discouragement of those who want to come forward. I invite members of this committee to join Senator McCain and me in asking the Department of Justice to investigate all of these claims: reports of fraud and destruction of documents, as well as retaliations against whistleblowers.

I am also greatly troubled by reports from several sources, including the GAO, of how the VA is failing to serve female veterans. The GAO found that nearly one in four VA hospitals nationwide does not have a full-time gynecologist on staff, and 140 community-based clinics serving veterans in rural areas do not have a designated women's health provider. This is contrary to the VA's goals, and the result is that female veterans are far more likely to be dumped onto the electronic wait list when seeking an appointment.

We must work swiftly to enact legislation that gets to the heart of the matter: reducing wait times, both through temporarily boosting outside services and through strengthening the inherent capability of the VA system. I agree with Senator Coburn's perceptive comments: we must find ways to boost the number of patients the VA treats without compromising the quality of care any individual receives. Let's get a bill that does this to the President's desk as soon as possible.

I know that we can achieve this goal because our Veterans' Affairs Committees have a strong record of working together. Earlier this year, I joined my colleagues in the House to listen to the testimony of many members of Disabled American Veterans, AMVETS, and the VFW. I hope that the spirit of cooperation that pervaded our joint hearings will carry us quickly through this conference process.

We know that America's longest war is going to continue to cast a shadow across our nation for years, maybe decades to come and we face this emergency and crisis that truly needs to be addressed. Strengthening the VA to help it keep faith with our veterans in a manner that is worthy of their service and sacrifice is absolutely essential.

I look forward to working with all of you in a serious and thoughtful way in the days ahead to meet this challenge.