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June 30, 2022

The Honorable Denis R. McDonough
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave NW
Washington, DC 20420

The Honorable Kiran Ahuja
Director
Office of Personnel Management
1900 E St NW
Washington, DC 20415

Dear Secretary McDonough and Director Ahuja,

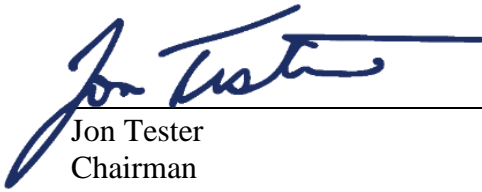
We write today to request an update regarding the efforts of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to establish an occupational series for Licensed Professional Mental Health Counselors (LPMHC) and Marriage and Family Therapists (MFT) at VA. Section 501(b) of Public Law 116-171, the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019 (the Hannon Act), required VA, in consultation with OPM, to develop an occupational series for LPMHCs and MFTs within one year of enactment of the law. Although the Hannon Act was signed into law on October 17, 2020, neither VA nor OPM has provided Congress with a timeline for establishment of the occupational series.

Creating an occupational series for LPMHCs and MFTs is integral to ensuring streamlined hiring of these mental health care professionals and delivering timely mental health care to veterans. The absence of an occupational series for these two positions can add difficulties to the hiring process for human resources personnel attempting to fill vacancies and candidates researching and applying for positions at VA. Easing the hiring process for these positions is critical – as of May 18, 2022, VA reported a 23 percent vacancy rate of LPMHCs and MFTs. This high vacancy rate means VA is less equipped to provide veterans with counseling for post-traumatic stress disorder, substance use disorders, military sexual trauma, readjustment to civilian life, marriage and family matters, and other issues. VA and OPM must act with haste to create an occupational series for these positions in order to ensure VA human resources personnel and potential qualified candidates for these positions are able to fill these vacancies as quickly as possible.

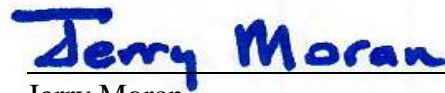
During a November 30, 2021, VA briefing to Congress regarding the implementation of the Hannon Act, VA stated that, in October 2021, OPM had agreed to establish an Integrated Project Team (IPT) to meet the legislative requirement in Section 501(b) to create an occupational series for LPMHCs and MFTs. This briefing provided no timeline regarding the IPT's course of action, and now, nearly seven months later, we have received no update on the work of the IPT or a projection for completion of the occupational series for LPMHCs and MFTs. This is also troubling given we have been asking VA and OPM since 2017 to establish an occupational series for these mental health professionals.

Please provide an update on the status of the IPT's work and a timeline for VA and OPM to attain compliance with Section 501(b) of the Hannon Act through development of the LPMHC and MFT occupational series. Ensuring VA is able to hire sufficient staff to provide high-quality counseling services in a timely manner is critical to meeting the mental health needs of veterans.

Sincerely,



Jon Tester
Chairman
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs



Jerry Moran
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs