

Senator Jay Rockefeller
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
"The State of VA Health Care"
Statement for the Record
May 15, 2014

Thank you, Chairman Sanders and Ranking Member Burr, for holding this important hearing. And thank you, Secretary Shinseki, for coming to speak with us today.

Secretary Shinseki, I think your record speaks for itself. You have been working tirelessly and your leadership on behalf of veterans has helped improve the VA health care system by leaps and bounds.

I will be honest with you – I am deeply troubled by the increasing reports of employee misconduct in VA facilities around the country. Stories like these, with the worst allegations coming from the VA facilities in Phoenix, are incredibly worrisome. They call into question our country's ability to address the needs of our veterans, and they damage the reputation of a system that has made great strides over the past few years.

If these reports are true, then appropriate action must be taken. Our veterans and their loved ones deserve nothing less.

Amidst stories of alleged secret waiting lists and falsified records, however, I do believe that it is important for everyone to remember one key fact: the VA treats millions of veterans every year, and it treats them exceptionally well. I know that the men and women employed by the VA – from the doctors to the nursing staff to the people who work in admission – are working day and night to improve the health of our veterans and honor their service. It is important not to forget this.

Currently, the VA faces major challenges. More people are enrolling in the VA than ever, and many of them have complex injuries. If the VA does not have enough doctors to see these patients, then these problems are a result of a lack of funding. And that is something that we in Congress can blame no one for but ourselves.

I applaud this Administration for its continued commitment to providing funding for veterans. The request for a three percent increase reflects the largest increase for any agency in the President's budget request. But if we're being honest about the needs of the VA, a three percent budget increase is not enough. As tens of thousands of our troops continue to come home – some with mental health problems or severe, debilitating wounds – we're funding an agency with incredible demands and health care costs at only half of our entire military budget.

We have a moral obligation to take care of our veterans. However, this Congress has been falling short of its obligations to care for our veterans when they return. And recently, it seems that it's only during crisis situations that we are forced to look at how we are prioritizing the care and long-term health of those who have fought for our country.

That is not to say that swift action must not be taken if the Inspector General determines there has been misconduct at the VA. But for as long as we continue to underfund the VA, I firmly believe problems will continue to arise.

Thank you.

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