

United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 5, 2017

Acting Director Kathleen McGettigan
Office of Personnel Management
1900 E Street, NW
Washington, DC 20415

Dear Director McGettigan:

We write to you today regarding efforts to ensure that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) can maximize its ability to provide our nation's veterans with high-quality, timely mental health care by making it easier to hire clinical staff for VA facilities. Over the last several years, VA took action to create qualification standards to enable the recruitment of Licensed Professional Mental Health Counselors (LPMHCs) and Marriage and Family Therapists (MFTs). However, despite VA's efforts to hire LPMHCs and MFTs, it does not appear that all obstacles have been eliminated. As such, we urge you to pursue an Occupational Series for LPMHCs and MFTs.

Presently, VA has well over a thousand vacancies nationally in mental health care delivery positions. Further, VA is seeing ever greater numbers of veterans requiring more mental health care services. LPMHCs and MFTs are positioned to help meet these gaps because they provide counseling to veterans suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, substance abuse, military sexual trauma, and other issues. They can also provide veterans with marital and family counseling. In early 2016, then-Under Secretary for Health Dr. David J. Shulkin confirmed that the addition of LPMHCs and MFTs had been a positive change for VA because they expanded VA facilities' staffing options. At the time, he felt that the lack of an Occupational Series did not restrict hiring. However, VA's data shows continued hiring challenges. In Fiscal Year 2015, VA hired 72 LPMHCs and 15 MFTs, and in FY 2016, they hired 64 LPMHCs and 24 MFTs. That is an increase of one person hired in FY2016 over FY2015.

Creating an Occupational Series for these providers should help aid veterans in getting timely access to mental health care services. We understand that the absence of an Occupational Series adds to human resources personnel's administrative workload by requiring extra procedures to post a vacancy, while also making it more difficult for qualified candidates to research and apply for open positions. VA officials frequently testify to Congress regarding the excessive time it takes to hire clinical professionals.

Accordingly, we would support any common-sense action, such as this one, that would help VA more easily hire staff to provide mental health services. Additionally, this step would complement other efforts to help VA provide LPMHCs and MFTs with access to training opportunities, such as VA's Health Professionals Trainee Program, enabling VA to more easily recruit this block of students as employees.

Thank you for your support of our nation's veterans. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



JON TESTER
United States Senator



JERRY MORAN
United States Senator