

**Statement for the Record - Senator Mike Johanns**  
**House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Conference Committee Meeting**  
**June 24, 2014**

Thank you, Chairmen Sanders and Miller and Ranking Members Burr and Michaud, for the opportunity to serve on this important committee. Our country has long promised to provide support and care for our veterans who have given so much for our nation. By both the House and Senate passing legislation to address the VA's access to care issues, we have sent a unified message that we have not forgotten that promise. My hope is that my colleagues are willing to work together in that same unified spirit to come to a final agreement on this bill and get it across the finish line.

I find the allegations against the VA and the initial Inspector General findings outrageous. We know for a fact now that VA's scheduling problems are systemic. This is inexcusable. There must be accountability for any wrongdoing and we must ensure that our veterans are receiving top notch care. Thousands of veterans have waited, and may still be waiting, to get the care they need and deserve.

In May, during the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee hearing about the waitlist scandal, I encouraged the expanded use of non-VA care to get urgent treatment to those veterans languishing on both secret and official waitlists. That is why I am so pleased to see this conference committee addressing this issue with a truly bipartisan solution. It gives greater flexibility and treatment options for veterans faced with long wait times or lengthy travel and brings needed transparency and accountability to the VA. The choice card injects much needed competition into the process and encourages the VA to get their act together. It's a win-win for our veterans. And while this is certainly a crisis, I do believe that we can find a way to be fiscally responsible while still ensuring our veterans get the care they need, when they need it.

Additionally, the accountability and transparency pieces of this legislation are critical. The notion that employment should be tied to performance might seem elementary, but that is not what has been happening at the VA. There have been several instances in which senior VA executives who were involved in mismanagement or negligence were not reprimanded, but instead received bonuses and positive performance reviews.

And while senior executive services employees can be disciplined and fired under current law, it can be a very long, drawn out process. In fact, Acting VA Secretary Gibson has indicated that the director of the Phoenix VA Health Care System remains on the government's payroll during her lengthy termination process. This is unacceptable. The Secretary needs the authority this bill provides to cut through the bureaucratic red tape and hold individuals responsible.

I am also pleased to see the inclusion of leases for the community-based outpatient clinics or CBOCs. In a time when the VA is struggling to provide timely access to care, these facilities are an important step in the right direction. I am particularly pleased to see the CBOC for Lincoln included in the legislation. This one is a no-brainer considering the House passed a similar bill by a vote of 346 to one last December.

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While there are many challenges facing the VA today, we can and we will get the VA back on track and focused on their core mission of providing quality healthcare to our veterans. They deserve nothing less. I look forward to working with my colleagues to do just that.