

**Honorable Jackie Walorski**

**Opening Statement**

**House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Conference Committee – “Discussion regarding H.R. 3230 Amendments”**

**Good afternoon,**

**It's an honor to be here today to start the process of finalizing legislation that will help our veterans. We need to get this right – we owe it to the men and women who served our country to get this right.**

**This isn't a partisan issue. All of us are appalled by the waitlists and negligence and deaths. Many of us here today have constituents who were directly impacted. There's a potential wrongful death case in my district that is being investigated right now.**

**It's very clear that institutional failures within the Department of Veterans Affairs are deeply ingrained. Attempts at reform before were oftentimes met with resistance, deception, and whistleblower retaliation. Now we are hearing that in addition to altering wait times, the Phoenix VA Medical Center has been altering the records of veterans who died waiting for care.**

**While bad actors within some of these medical centers put their own careers above the health of our nation's veterans, the Department turned a blind eye and rewarded those at the heart of this disaster with bonuses. Instead of punishing these people, Acting Secretary Gibson himself stated that cutting bonuses and transferring the money to underserved areas of the department, such as a veterans' suicide prevention hotline, was “a bunch of crap.” This insular and self-protective attitude is at the core of the problem and must change; there will never be an incentive to change if people aren't held accountable for their actions.**

**We need to get the care our veterans need and fast. There is no question that we must get veterans the care they deserve, whether the care come from inside or outside of the VA. The challenge before us today is to do so in a responsible fashion. The need for this legislation is great. However, simply providing a financial boost to an agency that has repeatedly demonstrated awful management practices will not solve the problem. There is no point to spending an additional \$50 billion a year on non-VA care if we don't do this right.**

**My commitment as we work on this legislation is to make sure that bad actors can be fired and to make sure we do whatever we need to do to pay for this legislation so we can make responsible reforms.**

**Now is our opportunity as legislators to take the first steps towards meaningful reform. These problems are multi-layered and getting to the bottom of them will be like peeling apart an onion. However, I am confident that the House and Senate reform proposals are positive steps in the right direction. I look forward to working with my colleagues in both Chambers, from both sides of the aisle in in hammering out a final version of legislation that responsibly addresses timely access to care and holds those bad actors accountable. I thank you for the opportunity to be a part of this committee and work on such an important issue facing our nation's veterans.**