

United States Senate

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SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING

February 3, 2016

The Honorable Robert McDonald
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonald,

As a member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, I am committed to using my oversight role on this Committee to hold the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) accountable to the needs of veterans. That is why I am following up on my letter sent on January 26, 2016, regarding the VA working with the Office of Inspector General to resolve discrepancies with the veterans' disability claims backlog statistics.

Despite specifying a deadline of February 2, 2016, for a response to that letter, VA has yet to provide me with a response to this issue. I respectfully request an immediate response to my questions in this letter, which I have reiterated below. Given the importance of the VA claims backlog to Nevada's veterans, I want to ensure this issue is addressed quickly and adequately.

During the January 21, 2016, hearing at the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, you and I discussed the accuracy of the VA disability claims statistics. As you well know, ensuring that VA disability claims are completed in both a timely and accurate manner is a top priority for me and for veterans in Nevada.

During this hearing, I raised a concern regarding the VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) testifying that it "can't trust" the VA's backlog statistics. Furthermore, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) testified the following in July 2014 in reference to VA backlog statistics:

"In several basic areas, they are not following general statistical practices. That looseness in their methodology translates to numbers that aren't accurate and aren't very helpful in terms of looking at trends over time in terms of performance, accuracy rates, and/or comparing offices in terms of relative performance . . . That's not good metrics."

Your response to me indicated that these concerns may have come up in 2014, but that today you "believe the data is accurate." While I recognize there may have been opportunities to resolve these concerns from the OIG, its report on this topic released on September 30, 2015, stated the following:

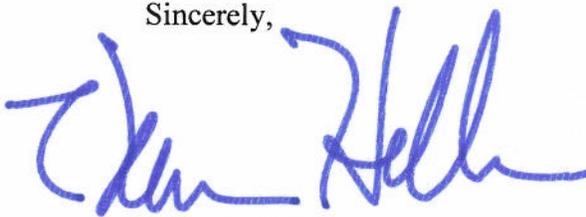
“We initiated several reviews at multiple [VA regional offices] addressing allegations of mismanagement and data manipulation. We are concerned these actions appear to be indicators of a systemic trend, motivated to enhance reported performance metrics at the [VA regional offices.]”

Given this conclusion in the OIG report, I believe it is time for you as the VA Secretary to come together with the Veterans Benefits Administration and the VA OIG to resolve these claims of inaccurate data so that Congress, the American public, and veterans can be assured that the VA and the VA's watchdog are in agreement on the accuracy of the claims backlog. Until then, there will not be a full understanding of what VA has accomplished when these statistics are put into doubt by the OIG. That is why I respectfully request you formally commit to resolve this issue with the OIG and address the following questions:

- What changes have been made to ensure the statistics are accurate for both the VA and the OIG?
- When will such changes go into effect and how will these changes be communicated to the VAROs?
- How are these changes reflected in the Monday Morning Workload Report?

Thank you for your attention to this matter, and I look forward to your immediate response to my concerns.

Sincerely,



DEAN HELLER
U.S. Senator

cc: Deputy Inspector General Linda A. Halliday