

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 21, 2016

COMMITTEES:

FINANCE

BANKING, HOUSING, AND  
URBAN AFFAIRS

COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND  
TRANSPORTATION

VETERANS' AFFAIRS

SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro  
Comptroller General of the United States  
United States Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro,

As members of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, we are writing to you today to respectfully request that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) conduct a study and review of the medical workforce recruitment and retention policies of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Given the GAO's efforts to bring efficiency and effectiveness to the federal government through evaluations and investigations, we appreciate the opportunity to contact you on this critical issue that will assist our nation's veterans.

As you may know, despite significant investments and an attempt to develop innovative recruitment and retention policies, the VA continues to experience a significant shortage of medical professionals, in part because it is a nationwide problem. However, this issue is particularly impacting veterans. Just last year, it was reported that VA's own statistics showed that nearly one in six positions of critical intake workers, doctors, nurses, and assistants were vacant. These types of shortages have a direct impact on quality and timeliness of the health care our nation's veterans have earned and deserve. A failure to fundamentally address this issue raises concerns about the effectiveness of existing programs and incentives, and calls into question whether greater reforms need to be instituted to ensure taxpayer dollars are more wisely spent on behalf of veterans.

Part of the GAO's mission includes "reporting on how well government programs and policies are meeting their objectives," as well as "performing policy analyses and outlining options for congressional consideration." With these goals in mind, we believe a study by GAO will help inform both the VA, policymakers, and the members of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee about how the VA can improve its policies or what Congress can do to ensure the VA has the tools it needs to be a competitive recruiter that attracts and retains high-quality medical professionals. That is why we request that GAO assess the effectiveness and provide recommendations on the following:

- VA's recruitment policies, incentives, and programs, including a focus on the VA's education debt reduction program; the extent to which the VA is effectively targeting the

partners with other federal entities in the recruitment of medical professionals; identification of policies or authorities that would allow the VA to better compete with the private sector for medical professionals; and the extent to which these policies, incentives, and programs are being adapted to be more effective in rural areas.

- VA's hiring processes, and whether streamlined hiring practices can ensure critical vacancies are filled in a timely manner.
- The extent of coordination between the VA and other Federal entities in the recruitment and hiring process, including the extent to which the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and VA are addressing impediments to the timely appointment and determination of qualifications for Directors of Veterans Integrated Service Networks and Medical Directors of the Department; the extent to which OPM is creating occupational series for specific medical professions in a timely manner; and the extent to which the VA is working with entities such as the Indian Health Service that are experiencing many of the same difficulties recruiting and retaining medical professionals.
- VA retention policies and incentives, and how they are being implemented;
- VA's residency program, including how it can be more effectively carried out within constraints that exist in the Direct Graduate Medical Education program; how it can be more effectively coordinated with program sponsors and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, particularly in underserved areas; and whether VA is appropriately targeting residents for high-vacancy positions.
- The VA's development and implementation of succession planning policies to address the prevalence of vacancies, particularly leadership vacancies, within the Veterans Health Administration.

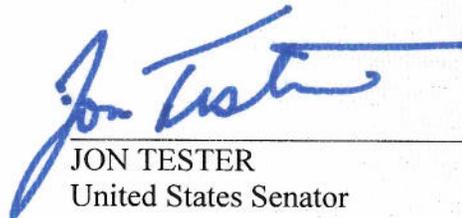
We believe this GAO review will help eliminate inefficiencies and offer opportunities for improvement that will benefit both American taxpayers and, above all, our veterans. Thank you for your time and your attention to this request.

Sincerely,



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DEAN HELLER  
United States Senator



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JON TESTER  
United States Senator