

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

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VETERANS' AFFAIRS

SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING

May 23, 2016

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

Dear Secretary McDonald,

I write to you extremely concerned about the comments you made on May 23, 2016, comparing the length of time veterans wait to receive health care at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to the length of time people wait for rides at Disneyland. Not only am I concerned about the flippant nature of your comparison but also the fact that you said that your agency should not use wait times as a measure of success because Disney does not either. As a member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, I believe it is my responsibility to follow up with you on the gravity of this issue as it is critical to ensure that veterans across my state are receiving the care they were promised in an expedient manner.

When men and women across our nation committed to serving America and risking their lives to protect us, our country promised that, in return, we would care for these service members upon their return home. This is not a Disney fairytale Mr. Secretary, this is reality. Recent statistics from Nevada show nearly 10,000 VA appointments remain scheduled over 30 days from the requested date. Given the issues that Nevada's veterans continue to face accessing VA health care, I do not believe that promise has been kept. Just a few weeks ago, I heard from a Nevada veteran's wife about the difficulty she faced scheduling a cardiology appointment for her husband. When there are life-threatening issues that can make or break a veterans' health, waiting is not an option, and Nevada's veterans deserve better.

Time and time again, I have called for accountability at your agency, and I strongly believe that it should start with the top. This is why your comments were not only disrespectful but harmful to ensuring that there will be any real change at the VA when it comes to the timeliness of health care appointment wait times. When you came before the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee for your confirmation, you promised accountability. Yet two years later, your agency has not only failed to meet the expectations of veterans, Congress, and the American public, but you have now walked back your commitments to those who served. Comparing the health and well-being of veterans to an amusement park is not amusing and is absolutely unacceptable. In issuing

your comments, I believe you exhibited a severe lack in judgement drawing into question your ability to provide accountability within your agency, as well as your ability to fulfill the VA's commitment to Nevada's veterans. That is why I respectfully request answers to the following questions:

1. Does the VA remain committed to providing appointments to veterans within 30 days of the request?
2. What are the current VA appointment wait times for veterans in Nevada and nationwide?
3. For each fiscal year since implementation of the Choice Act, how many VA health care beneficiaries are obtaining appointments through the Choice Program as a result of an appointment wait time of 30 days or more?
4. How do you explain to veterans that you believe their wait time for care is just as important as a wait time at an amusement park?
5. When did your view on appointment wait times change to the point that you believe wait time should not even be a measure for the VA?
6. Do you believe that the VA cannot achieve both timely *and* quality care simultaneously?
7. Do you believe you are still fit to serve and advocate on behalf of veterans as the VA Secretary if you aren't prioritizing the timeliness of their health care—the very reason you became Secretary in the midst of the 2014 VA health care scandal?

Thank you for attention to this serious matter, and I respectfully request a response to this letter by May 30, 2016.

Sincerely,



DEAN HELLER  
U.S. Senator