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COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

ONE HUNDRED SIXTEENTH CONGRESS

B-234 LONGWORTH HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515

<http://veterans.house.gov>

April 27, 2020

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

Dear Mr. Secretary:

Serving survivors of military sexual trauma is a longstanding priority of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs. At this challenging time, we recognize that the Department must remain laser focused on responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, given that this is Sexual Assault Awareness Month, we must not lose sight of the fact that military sexual trauma survivors remain among the most vulnerable veterans in need of healthcare and benefits.

The House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations joined with the Women Veterans Task Force to hold a hearing on February 5, 2020, to examine how the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) supports survivors of military sexual trauma. The witnesses, including VA officials, described how sexual harassment and sexual assault during military service is, unfortunately, widespread. Sexual violence represents an insidious cultural failure throughout the Department of Defense (DoD) and VA. In fact, 25 percent of women veterans and one percent of men reported to VA that they have experienced military sexual trauma. The numbers are likely far higher with recent estimates suggesting that at least 70 percent of cases are unreported.

VA is widely considered to be the best service provider for survivors of military sexual trauma. During the current COVID-19 pandemic, Military Sexual Trauma coordinators and other mental healthcare providers remain available to provide support through telehealth. However, as was detailed during the hearing, many veterans are turned away from care under the misunderstanding that they are ineligible. In addition, the witnesses described many shortfalls in VA's processes and policies regarding military sexual trauma survivors, and how these are implemented. For example, it is laudable that the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has a "secret shopper" program to test training and effectiveness of military sexual trauma coordinators. However, there is currently no similar accountability mechanism for ensuring that frontline staff, including front desk workers and eligibility clerks, are properly communicating with veterans who are eligible for military sexual trauma-related care. It was also surprising that veterans have not yet been given the option of choosing the gender of their medical benefits examiner, and even the language in claims denial letters can prove insensitive. The hearing

revealed many other issues that require examination. There are clear opportunities to strengthen how VA addresses a resolvable problem for the military and veteran communities.

Therefore, as we emerge from the current crisis, we request that VA establish an internal working group to perform a comprehensive review of its policies and procedures that affect survivors of military sexual trauma. As part of this comprehensive review, VA should include:

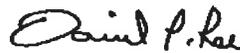
- Needed improvements of the military sexual trauma compensation claims process that reduces re-traumatizing survivors;
- How VHA and Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) can strengthen coordination and identification of best practices in order to improve communication with survivors;
- Why VA's current policies only allow for military sexual trauma treatment for active duty servicemembers at Vet Centers and not medical facilities;
- Opportunities to bolster and expand the work of military sexual trauma coordinators in both VBA and VHA, such as requiring adequate levels of staff time for this important work; and
- The sufficiency of training of VA employees regarding sexual harassment and assault within VA facilities.

Thank you for your attention to this critical issue during these extraordinary times. As we continue to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, we still must ensure that all veterans, including survivors of military sexual trauma, get access to the high-quality care and benefits they need. They deserve nothing less. We look forward to your response no later than June 15, 2020. If you have questions regarding this request please contact Peter Tyler, Majority Staff Director for the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations or Chris McNamee, Minority Staff Director for the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations.

Sincerely,



Mark Takano
Chairman
Committee on Veterans' Affairs



David P. Roe, M.D.
Ranking Member
Committee on Veterans' Affairs



Chris Pappas
Chairman
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations



Jack Bergman
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