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ONE HUNDRED SIXTEENTH CONGRESS
 B-234 LONGWORTH HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

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<http://veterans.house.gov>

May 10, 2019

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

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We write today to inquire as to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA's) progress on implementation of the "End Harassment" campaign to ensure a safe and welcoming environment for both veterans and employees.

On May 2, 2019, the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Health held a hearing on "Cultural Barriers Impacting Women Veterans' Access to Healthcare." We are deeply concerned about the pervasiveness of sexual harassment experienced by both women veterans and female employees. Sexual harassment not only creates a barrier to healthcare, but to all resources and benefits that women veterans have earned. Moreover, VA employees who experience sexual harassment are not empowered to serve veterans to the best of their abilities and talents because they feel uncomfortable and unsafe at work.

We applaud VA for funding research that systematically studied harassment of women veterans in VA health care settings. The study, published in February 2019, found that over 25 percent of women veterans experienced inappropriate or unwanted comments or behavior by male veterans at VA in the past year. Furthermore, women veterans who experienced this unacceptable treatment by fellow veterans were more likely to report feeling unsafe and delaying or missing care.¹ In addition, a 2018 report from the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board entitled "Update on Sexual Harassment in the Federal Workplace" found VA had the highest incidence of sexual harassment of employees of any federal agency. According to the report, 26 percent of women and 14 percent of men who worked at VA experienced sexual harassment.²

VA also deserves recognition for responding swiftly with the initial implementation of the "End Harassment" campaign. However, we learned during the hearing that training regarding harassment of or by veterans is not mandatory, and that it is possible there are employees across VA that have been untouched by direct intervention programs such as "Own the Moment."

¹ Klap, Ruth, Jill E. Darling, Alison B. Hamilton, Danielle E. Rose, Karen Dyer, Ismelda Canelo, Sally Haskell, and Elizabeth M. Yano. "Prevalence of Stranger Harassment of Women Veterans at Veterans Affairs Medical Centers and Impacts on Delayed and Missed Care." *Women's Health Issues* 29, no. 2 (2019): 107-115.

² Research Brief. U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "Update on Sexual Harassment in the Federal Workplace." March 2018

Furthermore, because all reporting is handled locally, there is no accountability regarding facilities that continue to fail to respond to sexual harassment.

VA must do better. As the agency entrusted with providing healthcare and benefits to veterans, VA must take immediate and appropriate action to address toxic workplaces from the local level to VA Central Office. Therefore, we request VA report to the Committee the nationwide collection of data at the local level regarding sexual harassment of both veterans and employees, and that this data be aggregated at VA Central Office. We also request an update on how VA plans to collect and implement best practices regarding response to sexual harassment on VA property. VA must also ensure point-of-contact information for individuals responsible for handling sexual harassment reports be prominently displayed in all buildings. Finally, we believe it is imperative that that all VA employees and contractors receive training on preventing and responding to sexual harassment of or by veterans on VA property and that you please provide us with your plan to ensure this happens in a timely manner.

We appreciate your attention to these important issues and for your support for equity in access to VA for all veterans, including the nation's two million living women veterans. We request a response no later than close of business on May 23, 2019.

Thank you for your assistance. Should you have questions about this request, please contact Andrea Goldstein, Senior Policy Advisor, Women Veterans Task Force at andrea.goldstein@mail.house.gov and Samantha Gonzalez, Minority Senior Professional Staff Member at samantha.gonzalez@mail.house.gov.

Sincerely,



Mark Takano
Chairman
Committee on Veterans' Affairs



David P. Roe
Ranking Member
Committee on Veterans' Affairs



Julia Brownley
Chairwoman
Subcommittee on Health



Neal Dunn
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Health



Chris Pappas
Chairman
Subcommittee on Oversight and
Investigations



Jack Bergman
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Oversight and
Investigations