

**STATEMENT OF  
JOAN M. MOONEY  
ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR CONGRESSIONAL  
AND LEGISLATIVE AFFAIRS  
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS  
BEFORE THE  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**SEPTEMBER 19, 2013**

Chairman Miller, Ranking Member Michaud, Members of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs: I appreciate the opportunity to testify on the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) work to provide Congress with the information and assistance it needs to fulfill its oversight responsibilities as well as be responsive to constituents.

VA and Congress share the same goal: to do everything we can to improve the health care, benefits and other services delivered to our Nation's Veterans, their families, and Survivors earned through service. That is what guides our work in the Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs (OCLA) in central office and throughout the broader VA health, benefits, and memorial affairs operation across the country that also work with congressional offices every day.

As Assistant Secretary for Congressional and Legislative Affairs, service to both Veterans and Congress is engrained in who I am. My father was an Atomic Veteran who passed away from cancer linked to his service. My mother was his primary caregiver who predeceased him putting his healthcare needs before her own. I personally understand the importance of the services VA provides.

I also understand the important oversight role that this and other congressional committees play in our great democracy. Prior to coming to VA, I served on Capitol Hill for nearly two decades, including for a senior Member of this Committee. For that reason I am aware of the demands placed on Members of Congress who seek to best represent their constituents and the responsibilities that come with oversight.

Over the last few years, Secretary Shinseki, other VA senior leaders and I have welcomed the opportunity to meet with Members of this Committee and other Members of the House and Senate, in your offices or back home to hear directly about your concerns and learn how VA can improve services for Veterans. For example, annually, Secretary Shinseki and I request meetings, either one on one or in small groups, with Members of this Committee as well as Members of the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs and Senate and House Appropriations Subcommittees on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies. Through meetings in informal settings as well as committee hearings and roundtables, VA seeks to engage this and other related committees regularly.

I understand Congress' need for timely and accurate information about developments affecting Veterans policy nationally or locally. I also understand the importance of receiving information in advance of an upcoming hearing or mark-up.

VA recognizes the frustration that Committee Members and staff have regarding submission of testimony. While VA strives to meet the Committee's 48-hour in advance testimony submission rules, we at times cannot meet the timeline, particularly when a hearing is called with short notice. Hearings on policy or legislation raise important, complex and often new issues that require careful study and consideration by VA. Let me state our continued desire to work with the Committee to improve timely delivery of VA testimony and on more advance lead time for hearings.

As I stated earlier, accuracy in the information we provide to Congress is a top goal and so while we have and continue to provide a significant volume of information to Congress, quality is just as important as quantity. Some of the information requested may include data the Department does not collect or does not collect in the form that is being asked. As a result, certain requests may require VA to conduct data calls, taking time and resources and impacting the ability to process other requests. That is why it is important for us to work together to ensure that the requests from the Committee are appropriately structured so that it is very clear what is being asked for, realistic timelines can be set, and adjustments can be made to facilitate getting the information to the Committee. These discussions are also important so that the time of subject matter experts in the field or VA central office who may be asked to compile and assemble much of the information, be managed in the most efficient and effective manner possible allowing them to balance their day to day work with responding to these important requests.

Our mission in OCLA is to improve the lives of Veterans, their families and Survivors. We do that by fostering a productive working relationship with Members of Congress, their staffs, and committees, keeping them abreast of policy matters and programs, and helping VA better understand and engage with Congress.

As all of you know from firsthand experience, VA engages with Members of Congress on many fronts. At our medical facilities, benefits regional offices and cemeteries across the country there are VA staff that respond to local congressional requests for information, site visits and tours, and VA participation at congressional town halls and outreach events, among many other types of requests.

VA's OCLA, based in central office, is staffed by 46 dedicated professionals that help operate one of the busiest congressional affairs offices in the Federal government. Today OCLA's staff includes 23 Veterans, representing 50 percent of our workforce, an increase of 39 percent since I began my service as Assistant Secretary. Increasing the number of Veterans working in OCLA has been a longstanding goal of mine as Veterans and family members of Veterans bring firsthand experience to our daily work.

Our staff also includes many individuals with prior work in congressional offices or Veterans Service Organizations and advocacy groups.

As the second largest Federal agency after the Department of Defense, VA provides care to approximately 6.3 million Veterans and other beneficiaries, has 1,800 points of care, provides 3.6 million Veterans with disability compensation, and employs over 330,000 people. In short, VA touches every Congressional district in a way that is unique among Federal agencies. From the conception to the opening of Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOC), to the status of VA's effort to eliminate the disability compensation claims backlog, to providing information on VA's successful home loan program that kept Veterans in danger of foreclosure in their homes, to technical assistance to Members of Congress on their draft legislation, our office both proactively provides and responds to a broad swath of requests for information from Congress. Each week, VA also sends several e-mail communications to Washington, D.C. and district contacts in 541 Member offices and congressional committees, containing information on VA policies, programs, and funding announcements such as VA grants to community organizations providing services to homeless and at-risk Veterans and their families.

Just within VA central office, OCLA provides a large amount of information to Congress. During the last three fiscal years and through August 2013 OCLA has provided or responded to over 80,000 congressional requests. Those include: VA officials testifying at over 260 congressional hearings; conducting over 2,000 congressional briefings or meetings; responding to over 4,700 questions for the record; processing over 75,000 Member inquiries – separate from casework done by local congressional offices with VA's regional offices, medical facilities, and cemeteries; and managing nearly 300 GAO engagements, leading to 175 draft and 98 final reports.

Since the office began collecting data on formal policy-related requests for information, during the last one and one half fiscal years VA has responded to over 4,700 of such requests. During the first six months of Fiscal Year 2013, VA responded to over 2,000 formal requests for policy-related information and technical assistance requests on legislation.

In recent years, VA has begun receiving oversight requests from this and other committees for e-mail records of VA employees. These are a new type of congressional request for information for VA and require a very labor and resource-intensive process. For example, this Committee's request for e-mails and documents related to the VA's Pharmaceutical Prime Vendor (PPV) contract required the review of hundreds of thousands of e-mails and documents and resulted in over 34,500 relevant e-mails and documents being delivered to the Committee. In fulfilling this data request, VA dedicated a team of employees that worked for over 2300 hours to complete the task. For a request for another committee, to date, VA provided over 34,900 e-mails and documents related to the 2011 VA Human Resources Training Conferences in Orlando, Florida. A team of employees has been dedicated to this work for significant portions of the last year and this data pull effort continues.

While the above information captures much of the Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs' functions, so as to provide a full picture of our work, including those areas where data is not collected or applicable, let me also describe our areas of responsibility. They include:

- Managing technical feedback to draft legislation proposed or being considered by all congressional offices, and especially the authorizing committees;
- Managing all hearings before Congress, including field hearings;
- Responding to requests for information (including phone, e-mail, walk-ins), meetings, and briefings from Members, staff and committees on many subjects;
- Managing select congressional casework requests;
- Notifying congressional offices and committees of changes in VA policy, local and national announcements and related information;
- Managing departmental congressionally mandated reports;
- Developing VA's legislative proposals;
- Leading engagements with the Government Accountability Office (GAO) including the management of reports requested by Congress each year;
- Coordinating congressional oversight travel to VA facilities across the country;
- Organizing and holding training for congressional staff working Veterans' policy matter as well as casework;
- Organizing and holding educational briefings for congressional staff on a rotating series of topics related to VA health care, benefits, and services;
- Supporting VA officials in their meetings with Congress; and
- Leading the confirmation process for presidential nominees requiring Senate confirmation.

In OCLA, our customer base is also broad. In addition to our authorizing committees there are many congressional entities we engage with and a number of committees that conduct Veteran - related hearings and oversight work. Our customers include 541 Member offices; House and Senate Committees on Veterans' Affairs; GAO; Congressional Research Service; Congressional Budget Office; and other congressional committees including Senate and House Appropriations Subcommittees on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies; House and Senate Armed Services Committees; House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform; Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs; House and Senate Budget Committees and many other House and Senate committees.

I endeavor to meet regularly with each of the Staff Directors of the House and Senate Committees on Veterans' Affairs, majority and minority, to provide an opportunity to engage and speak about important issues, review or prioritize outstanding items, and discuss developments in the Congress and in the Department. These interactions are in addition to communications over the phone or e-mail. I am personally committed, as is the Department, to work collaboratively with Congress. This is reflected in the efforts to engage, meet with and respond to Members of Congress and staff by all VA

employees here in central office in Washington and those at our medical centers, CBOCs, benefits regional offices and cemeteries nationwide.

In conclusion, VA and Congress share the same goal: to do everything we can to improve the health care, benefits and other services delivered to our Nation's Veterans, their families, and Survivors. That is what guides our work in providing an incredible volume of information to Congress on a daily basis.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify and am prepared to answer any questions you may have.