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House Veterans Affairs Committee Member Day Testimony
Statement from Congressman Steve Cohen
May 26, 2021

Good morning, Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Bost and Committee members,

Thank you for the opportunity to present my testimony today.

The Veterans Health Administration facilities have been critical to providing our veterans health care after they leave the Armed Services. In Memphis, the administration, clinicians and staff at the Memphis VA Medical Center work diligently year after year to improve and be a quality leader within the local community. They have aggressively expanded their research program in support of Veteran health from 42 projects four years ago to more than 210 today. They are constantly looking to adapt and innovate, with two practices recognized by the VA Innovator Network. I appreciate the Memphis VA Medical Center being in my district to serve the veterans of Memphis and the surrounding community and will continue to work with them to provide the quality health care that our veterans deserve. Despite the continued improvements that the Memphis VA Medical Center has made in the past few years, they still rank at the bottom of the region for the overall rating of the hospital. I recommend to the Committee that additional support be considered for the Memphis VA Medical Center to assist in raising the quality of care. The Veterans who rely on the Memphis VA Medical Center expect better and deserve better.

In order for our VA facilities to compete in today's competitive health care market, Congress must ensure that they are up-to-date and safe. Currently, there is a \$22 billion maintenance backlog of poor and failing conditions at VA facilities. The VA has identified between \$49 to

\$59 billion of major and minor construction projects in its long-range capital action plan. As one tool to address this backlog and the future needs of the VA, I encourage the Committee to move to pass my bill HR800, the Preference for Local Veteran Contractors Act. Frequently, VA contracts are awarded to large, non-local companies. The Preference for Local Veteran Contractors Act bill would give preference to contractors who have principal offices within a 60-mile radius of the VA facility covered by the contract. By contracting with local companies, the VA gets the advantage of local expertise while bolstering the local economy with jobs and income. My bill would strengthen the VA's ties to local communities while supporting the livelihoods of their local residents.

On a broader scale, I am pleased that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the VA Health Administration moved quickly to convert many of their appointments to telehealth, or virtual medicine, appointments. These telehealth appointments have allowed countless veterans to stay in contact with their care team while minimizing potential exposure to COVID. For veterans who live far from VA health facilities or who otherwise have logistical issues, or who have legitimate concerns about potential exposure to COVID or other communicable diseases, telehealth has made it easier to be seen and should continue to be an option for our veterans beyond the pandemic.

While telehealth has been and will continue to be helpful, there are many things that cannot be done remotely. Beginning March 18, 2020 when non-urgent elective procedures ceased across all VA Medical Centers through the restart on May 4 and even through today, there have been veterans who were either unable or understandably hesitant to go to a hospital for normal and routine screenings. Because of this, many diseases are being discovered at later stages, requiring more intense, and often more expensive, treatments. Additional resources and innovation will likely be required to provide proper care for those who had care delayed.

Beyond delayed care for our veterans, the long-term effects of COVID will also require the Committee's attention. The VA has recorded over 260,000 positive COVID cases, more than 4,000 inpatient deaths, and 8,000 known other deaths.¹ Many of the 248,000 surviving veterans with COVID will be "long-haulers" who will have persistent, long-lasting health problems caused by the virus. Numerous studies show that COVID-19 patients are at greater risk of respiratory problems, tinnitus, headaches, and neurocognitive disorders that did not exist prior to the COVID-19 diagnosis. The VA should prepare to provide proper care for these veterans.

Outside of the Veterans Health Administration, one of the concerns I hear frequently from my constituents is the delay in response from the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC). I am certain that the backlog of nearly 500,000 pending cases is well-known amongst the members of this committee. What may be less known is the individual impact this has on individual veterans and their families.

One of my constituents was a Vietnam veteran who died in the first few days of July 2020. His widow requested a DD-214 on her own. After not getting a prompt response, she contacted my office for assistance so that her husband could be buried in a West Tennessee Veterans

¹ Department of Veterans Affairs COVID-19 National Summary
<https://www.accesstocare.va.gov/Healthcare/COVID19NationalSummary>

Cemetery. The DD-214 was not received until Saturday, August 01, 2020. In the meantime, the widow and the veterans' family had to wait for nearly a month before they were able to proceed with a burial.

Another of my constituents contacted my office in September requesting assistance to obtain his DD-214 for end-of-life planning. We did not receive the DD-214 until two weeks ago. It took eight months for the NPRC to send a simple form, delaying my constituents' ability to make plans for his estate.

Both of the waits described above are unacceptable. I understand that the pandemic caused delays and required numerous work-arounds, but I hope that this Committee will continue to explore ways for the VA to quickly work through the current backlog and to establish systems that will prevent this many claims from accumulating in the future.

Thank you again for this opportunity to express my concerns. I look forward to working with you during the 117th Congress to help our veterans.