

Statement of Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett (VI)

Committee on Veterans Affairs

Hearing: “Members’ Day”

Wednesday, May 26, 2021

Greetings. I would like to thank Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Bost, and the Members of this Committee for the opportunity to voice the current struggles and needs of the veterans of the U.S. Virgin Islands.

In July of 2019, the staff of the Committee on Veterans Affairs traveled to the Virgin Islands following reports of the underserved veteran population. The staff members observed the large number of difficulties and obstacles faced by Virgin Islands veterans, particularly in accessing medical and healthcare services. Today, almost two years later, our veterans still lack access to timely and convenient medical and emergency services. Over the years, the veterans in the Virgin Islands have voiced their discontent and fought endlessly for better healthcare and requested better treatment from the Department of Veterans Affairs. These veterans have been all but forgotten by the VA.

The Virgin Islands currently houses two VA clinics, one on St. Thomas and one on St. Croix, with no VA hospital. The Governor Juan F. Luis Hospital on St. Croix reached out recently in effort to partner with the VA for a hospital wing. After numerous discussions, there has been no significant progress on this project, which has been attributed to findings of the VA that there has been no recent significant increase in the veteran population or needs following the new assessment.

The Department of Veterans Affairs enrolls veterans of the U.S. Virgin Islands as part of the VA Caribbean Healthcare System, which includes Puerto Rico; but this makes it almost impossible to attain the correct population of veterans enrolled in the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) that reside in the Virgin Islands. However, due to the outcome of no accurate reported increase in our VA population, the Juan F. Luis Hospital is now referred to Optum so that veterans are included in that contract, which be available to all veterans in the Virgin Islands through the VA MISSION Act. The funding of VHA facilities is extremely important to help serve our veterans population.

Due to limited resources and medical care in the Virgin Islands, many veterans are forced to leave their island home to travel to the VA hospital in Puerto Rico to seek medical care. Some specific examples: a Vietnam war veteran recently required immediate medical attention, but was unable to get an urgent appointment, and therefore was left with no choice but to leave the island for better service at his own cost. Another veteran cried with frustration at having to travel for physical therapy and the lack of access to services to assist with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. There are a great number of instances too numerous to mention; heart breaking stories from our veterans of mistreatment, neglect, and not valued or cared for by the VA. This is a very serious issue and needs to be addressed immediately.

During visits to our local VA clinic, staff expressed consistent difficulties caused by understaffing and the lack of capacity to assist veterans in a timely matter to complete authorizations for community care. Veterans have been waiting over a month of an authorization and another month for the actual appointment. Also, there are many reports of appointments being canceled

and the veterans not being notified or provided with an updated appointment. Additionally, veterans are currently waiting over a year for the selection of frames for eyeglasses once they have completed the initial exam. These reports have created a lack of continuity of care, as well as the perception that the staff at the clinics and the VA do not care about the veterans of the Virgin Islands. Once again, this is unacceptable.

It has been more than a year since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic that has impacted us all. During the pandemic, my staff and I presented the Methodist Training and Outreach Center with \$300,000 in effort to “end homelessness,” which was granted by the Department of Veterans Affairs. The outreach has been able to address the demand and assist veterans and their families during the pandemic. The VA Caribbean Healthcare System is currently on the second vaccination drive for veterans in the Virgin Islands. For each vaccination drive held by the local VA, only 150 vaccines have been distributed to each island. With such a low number of vaccines allocated to the territory from Puerto Rico, many veterans were turned away from their own VA clinic and sent to seek vaccines elsewhere. No veteran should ever be turned away from getting a vaccine from their own VA. While I do appreciate the efforts that have been made, there is much to be changed and more needed for the ones who placed their lives on the line for their country.

President Biden signed the SAVE LIVES Act to expand and strengthen vaccine efforts. This legislation gives veterans and their families the opportunity to access the protection needed from the VA. While I have witnessed the efforts of VHA locally in regard to their movement of ensuring the safety and health of the veteran community in the Virgin Islands, I am

concerned about the low vaccine supply made available to the VA clinics in the Virgin Islands for the vaccine drives.

The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, also signed by President Biden, grants veterans relief related to copayments or other cost sharing for VA health care and reimburses veterans who paid a copay or other cost sharing for care and prescriptions through September 30, 2021. Thousands of critical compensation and pension exams have been postponed, causing unnecessary delay in much needed benefits in our nation. Veterans on island will benefit from the American Rescue Plan provisions making it easier for them to access care during the pandemic. The veterans of the Virgin Islands deserve the care and assistance they have earned following such a global event.

To that end, I strongly support the bill soon to be introduced in the House by Congressman Sablan to create an advisory committee within the Department of Veterans Affairs that would be comprised of veterans from the outlying insular areas of the United States, including the Virgin Islands. The residents of U.S. territories have served and died, on a per capita basis, at a higher rate in every United States war and conflict since World War I, as an expression of their commitment to American democratic principles and patriotism. It's very important that our local veterans' concerns are heard by a closer support committee with the other insular areas of the United States. Too often, these U.S. islands are overlooked by the needs and wants of the mainland. I request that this bill move forward through this committee to passage by the House. This proposed advisory committee within the VA will give our local veterans the voice that needs to be heard on the mainland United States.

Regardless of the geographic location or the number of veterans we have, all veterans deserve a strong commitment from their country, their government, and from us as leaders. I implore further commitment to properly and adequately serve the needs of the veterans of the U.S. Virgin Islands. Thank you for receiving my statement.