



Opening Statement of the Honorable Max Rose

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House Veterans Affairs Committee Hearing

H.R. 472; H.R. 1041; Discussion Draft: To amend title 38, United States Code, to prohibit the Secretary of Veterans Affairs from transmitting certain information to the Department of Justice for use by the national instant criminal background check system; H.R. 740; and H.R. 1391

February 25, 2025

Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Takano, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on these important pieces of legislation affecting our nation's Veterans. It is an honor to appear before you, as a senior advisor for Vet Voice Foundation, representing nearly 2 million Veterans and military families across the country, and drawing on my experience serving in the U.S. Army and my ongoing commitment to those who have worn the uniform of our Armed Forces.

People join the service for many reasons and share a common experience that those who have not served cannot always understand. Themes of dedication, sacrifice, embracing the suck and resilience are common among veterans. I witnessed the challenges they encounter upon transitioning to civilian life, being suddenly disconnected from those they served with. Everything feels harder without your battle buddy, but there is a familiarity that comes with Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) encounters that can feel a little like being back in the ranks, at least that's how it feels to me. But besides just feeling good, I want those encounters to work for me and my Veteran peers.

Like millions of my fellow Veterans, I use the Department of Veterans Affairs for my healthcare. My personal experiences with the VA have been overwhelmingly positive. I have received high-quality care from dedicated professionals who understand the unique needs of those who have served. I strongly believe that investing in VA direct care should be an imperative, not an afterthought, and must be central to any discussion about caring for Veterans. The Veterans community is largely united in this view; in a recent VFW survey, Veterans indicated overwhelming support for VA to remain our primary deliverer of care.¹

We shouldn't lose sight that the VA is more than just a healthcare provider; it is a system built to serve Veterans in ways no private sector model can fully replicate. The goal should not be to shift resources away from the VA, but to maintain capacity in-house to ensure it remains strong, effective, and capable of meeting Veterans' needs now and in the future. I support Veterans' choice and the Community Care system as important options to access unique specialties or capacity that local VA clinics cannot provide. But I don't believe that community care or veteran choice should outweigh the VA system at face value because we cannot assume that choice automatically increases provider capacity. Many local providers are already backlogged and overwhelmed with local patients, resulting in long wait times for veterans using community appointments.

I am gravely concerned by the lack of transparency and uncertainty surrounding recent policy changes that directly impact the VA workforce. While some positions at the VA were exempted from the recent round of personnel reductions, military-centric news agencies have reported that

¹ Statement of Patrick Murray, Director National Legislative Service Veterans of the Foreign Wars of the United States, before the House Veterans Affairs Committee. 17 December 2024. <https://www.vfw.org/advocacy/national-legislative-service/congressional-testimony/2024/12/pending-legislation>.

employees supporting the Veterans Crisis Line and Vet Centers were fired.² Veterans employed by VA, many of them disabled, have reported receiving confusing messages about their employment status. Some have been “fired for performance problems”, despite receiving consistently excellent performance reviews.³ Others accepted the deferred resignation offer, and were later told they were ineligible, and then fired.

Veterans make up 30% of the federal workforce — far higher than their representation in the private sector. More than half of the Veterans employed by the federal government – about 340,000 – are disabled. Federal workforce policy and Veterans policy are thus one and the same. Policies that impact the federal workforce disproportionately impact Veterans, and disabled Veterans in particular.⁴ Policies that harm the VA workforce are doubly harmful, impacting both the Veterans employed by VA, and the Veterans who rely on VA.

The men and women who serve our Veterans deserve clarity, stability, and support. It is incumbent upon this Committee, and every elected representative, to demand greater information from the administration, to consult closely with your Veteran constituents, and to fully assess the potential consequences of the externally directed staff reductions before moving forward with the legislation under consideration today. I urge great caution before taking any action that could undermine the VA’s ability to serve those who rely on it.

I would like to offer some brief comments on the legislation before the Committee today.

H.R. 472, The Restore VA Accountability Act of 2025

H.R. 472 purports to ensure that VA leadership can take necessary action to address poor performance and misconduct within its workforce while maintaining fairness and due process – a laudable goal, and one we all share.

Unfortunately, if enacted into law as written, H.R. 472 would be counterproductive. VA already has the authorities it needs to discipline employees and it uses those authorities every day. This bill is a counterproductive attempt to make it “easier” to fire employees, but it will only result in lengthy litigation over its unconstitutionality. Litigation arising from VA’s use of one section of the Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act of 2017

² “VA Crisis Line Employees Among Those Fired Amid Federal Workforce Purge.” Patricia Kime, Military.com, 19 February 2025. <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2025/02/19/va-crisis-line-employees-among-those-fired-amid-federal-workforce-purge.html>

³ Examples of Veterans fired by DOGE (not comprehensive list): “Disabled vet says he was laid off from Department of Veterans Affairs.” WPTV News, 18 February 2025. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u8fgLmbCUQU>.

“Veteran speaks out after job at VA terminated in DOGE purge.” CNN, 19 February 2025.

“He Served Four Tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. DOGE Just Fired Him.” Newsweek, 20 February 2025. <https://www.newsweek.com/he-served-four-tours-iraq-afghanistan-doge-just-laid-him-off-2033503>

“Disabled veteran shares emotional story about being fired from federal job.” CNN, 19 February 2025. <https://www.cnn.com/2025/02/19/us/video/disabled-veteran-fired-federal-job-digvid>

⁴ Employment of Veterans in the Federal Executive Branch, Fiscal Year 2021. U.S. Office of Personnel Management, November 2023. <https://www.opm.gov/fedshirevets/hiring-officials/ved-fy21.pdf>

resulted in more than \$130 million taxpayer dollars in settlements with former employees and the reinstatement of over 100 employees who had been terminated using that law.⁵ H.R. 472 arguably raises even more constitutional questions than the 2017 Accountability Act, putting VA at risk of lengthy, costly litigation and undermining its ability to take effective disciplinary action.

This bill would also undermine the due process and collective bargaining rights of VA employees compared to other federal employees.⁶ This would have the effect of driving talented, committed professionals away from the VA, and subjecting more Veterans to diminished quality of care. The VA's ability to recruit and retain skilled professionals is already a challenge, and weakening workplace protections will only exacerbate this issue. Ensuring accountability within the VA is critical, but it must be done in a way that strengthens, rather than weakens, the institution's ability to serve Veterans effectively. One wise step, for example, would be to invest in VA's ability to train HR employees and managers in how to effectively use tried and true Title 5 disciplinary authorities, which already enable VA to remove poor performing employees while respecting civil service protections.

H.R. 1041, The Veterans 2nd Amendment Protection Act

As a Veteran, I take the Second Amendment and the rights of those who served very seriously. Protecting the constitutional rights of Veterans is a responsibility we all share, but H.R. 1041 is not the right approach. Under current law, certain VA determinations regarding a Veteran's ability to manage their own finances can lead to their information being reported to the National Instant Criminal Background Check System. This safeguard exists to prevent those who may be at risk of harming themselves or others from accessing firearms. While due process concerns deserve attention, this bill eliminates an important mechanism that helps prevent tragedies, without offering a meaningful alternative to protect Veterans in crisis.

Veterans are at a higher risk of suicide than the general population, and firearm-related deaths account for the vast majority of Veteran suicides. Of the 18 Veteran deaths by suicide every day, 13 are from a self-inflicted firearm injury, according to a 2023 VA suicide prevention report.⁷ Weakening protections designed to identify those at risk could

⁵ "VA reinstated 100 employees fired under widely challenged law, paid \$134M to hundreds more." Jory Heckman, Federal News Network, 29 October 2024.
<https://federalnewsnetwork.com/workforce/2024/10/va-reinstated-100-employees-fired-under-widely-challenged-law-paid-134m-to-hundreds-more/>

⁶ National Fraternal Order of Police letter opposing the Restore VA Accountability Act, 18 July 2023.
<https://fop.net/letter/h-r-4278-the-restore-va-accountability-act/>

National Federation of Federal Employees, Statement for the Record, 12 July 2023.

<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/VR/VR08/20230712/116186/HHRG-118-VR08-20230712-SD003.pdf>

American Federation of Government Employees, Statement for the Record, 12 July 2023.

<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/VR/VR08/20230712/116186/HHRG-118-VR08-20230712-SD005.pdf>

⁷ 2023 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report. Department of Veterans Affairs, November 2023.

have devastating consequences. Ensuring due process is important, but this bill goes too far by stripping away an essential safeguard without providing any replacement to ensure Veterans who need help receive it.

Instead of passing legislation that could put more Veterans at risk, Congress should focus on improving mental health services, expanding access to crisis intervention by protesting the recent firing of suicide hotline operators, and ensuring Veterans have the resources they need. Protecting Veterans' rights must go hand in hand with protecting their lives.

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Like H.R. 1041, this proposal shows reckless disregard for Veterans' lives, especially in the context of diminishing support from the administration for VA's suicide prevention programs. This bill would remove an essential safeguard by preventing the VA from reporting veterans who have a disability rating for mental illness to the background check system. The background check system is not about infringing on Second Amendment rights—it is about ensuring that firearms do not fall into the hands of individuals who have been legally determined to be a danger to themselves or others. I support the right to bear arms, but with that right comes responsibility. Responsible gun ownership means recognizing that mental health crises must be taken seriously and that preventing tragedies is more important than rhetoric.

Regrettably, recent policy changes have resulted in the firing of staff for VA's Veterans Crisis Line. I fear that cuts to VA resources, combined with advancing these proposals, would send a dangerous message to Veterans: that suicide prevention is not a priority. Rather than advancing these proposals, Congress should focus on improving mental health care for veterans, reducing the stigma around seeking help, and ensuring that due process is followed when making determinations about competency. We must not allow a well-intentioned but misguided bill to undo necessary protections that help keep Veterans, their families, and the public safe.

H.R. 740, Veterans' ACCESS Act of 2025

I strongly support ensuring that Veterans have the freedom to choose among healthcare services and providers. However, I have grave concerns that this bill would significantly weaken the Veterans care system by diverting critical funding from VA direct care to the private sector, ultimately reducing Veterans' access to the specialized, high-quality care they rely on. The VA was built to serve Veterans with complex, service-related conditions—injuries and illnesses that many private providers are neither equipped nor trained to handle. By allowing Veterans to bypass the VA system without oversight, this

bill would accelerate the shift from the VA as a provider of care to merely a payer for private sector services, undermining the very institution designed to serve those who have worn the uniform.

The consequences of this approach are clear: fewer resources for VA hospitals and clinics, staff reductions, and the closure of vital programs and facilities. Veterans—especially those with service-connected disabilities—will see their choices diminish as the services they depend on disappear. Additionally, the VA plays an essential role in medical research, provider training, and emergency response, all of which will suffer if its funding is drained. Instead of dismantling the VA in the name of choice, Congress should focus on strengthening and modernizing it to ensure Veterans continue to receive the best care possible—care that is tailored to their unique needs and experiences.

H.R. 1391, Student Veteran Benefit Restoration Act of 2025

The Student Veteran Benefit Restoration Act, as drafted, is a sound proposal and important step in protecting the benefits Veterans earned through their service. The GI Bill has long been one of the most successful programs in helping Veterans transition to civilian life, but it must be protected from bad actors who seek to exploit those who have served. Unfortunately, too many Veterans have been cheated by predatory for-profit schools that take their benefits while providing little or no real education in return. This bill ensures that those who were defrauded can have their GI Bill benefits restored so they can continue their education and pursue the opportunities they earned through their service – a commonsense measure that aligns protection for Veterans with those already provided to non-Veteran students under federal loan forgiveness programs.

As you deliberate on these bills, my guiding principle remains steadfast: our Veterans deserve policies that honor their service, protect their rights, and provide them with the support they need to thrive. I look forward to working with this Committee to ensure your legislative efforts achieve our common goals while upholding the trust and well-being of our Veterans.

Supporting and improving the VA is not just a policy decision—it is a sacred obligation. This Committee has the weighty responsibility of ensuring that obligation is met with the greatest care, diligence, and commitment.

I thank you for your time and look forward to your questions.