

**Statement of the Honorable Mike Bost
Subcommittee on Health
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives
Legislative Hearing**

“Legislative Hearing on H.R. 2460; H.R. 3956; H.R. 3974; H.R. 3989; draft legislation to ensure that each VA medical facility complies with requirements relating to scheduling veterans for health care appointments and to improve the uniform application of directives; and, draft legislation to direct VA to establish a list of drugs that require an increased level of informed consent.”

**Wednesday, April 20, 2016, at 10:00 a.m.
334 Cannon House Office Building**

Chairman Benishek and Ranking Member Brownley, thank you for holding this hearing on pending legislation which is critical to better oversight of the Department of Veterans' Affairs. Careful consideration of how the VA should be reformed is needed to ensure better health care access and medical treatment for our nation's veterans.

As a Marine and the father of a Marine, I recognize the selfless sacrifice that so many Americans have made in defense of our freedoms. There is no doubt that we must fight for the brave men and women who have fought for us. I know my colleagues on both sides of the aisle feel the same way.

Winning any battle requires steadfast and capable leadership. No organization can operate under a revolving door of interim leaders –and certainly not one tasked with caring for America's heroes. Unfortunately, that revolving door of leadership is exactly what is occurring at VA medical facilities across the country. This situation is simply unacceptable, as it may undermine the quality, consistency, and speed of care that our veterans receive.

Our nation's warfighters deserve better, and that is why I introduced H.R. 3956, the VA Health Center Management Stability and Improvement Act. This common sense bipartisan bill requires the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs to submit a plan to Congress within 120 days of passage for finding and hiring a permanent, highly-qualified director at each VA Medical Center (VAMC) that is currently under temporary leadership. This legislation is endorsed by the American Legion, Vietnam

Veterans of America, Paralyzed Veterans of America, AMVETS, Disabled Veterans of America, and the Association of the United States Navy.

The “interim leadership” problem happening at Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Centers across the country first came to my attention in my own backyard. I am proud to represent the Twelfth Congressional District of Illinois in Congress, and many Southern Illinois veterans access health care through the St. Louis Department of Veterans Affairs Health Care System. The St. Louis VA Medical Center provides health care to over 45,000 veterans annually, and I remain very concerned about the lack of stability in leadership there and how it may impact system operations.

Over the last several years, the St. Louis VA has been managed by more than seven different acting directors. According to the VA’s hiring policies, there is no time limit for Senior Executive Service or Medical Center Directors to serve on a detail in an acting capacity, yet these details must be approved in increments not to exceed 120 days, with a possible extension to 240 days.

Consequently, the St. Louis VAMC has experienced a revolving door of interim directors. This short term leadership negatively impacts the ability to engage in long-term planning and other functions necessary to provide and improve health care for the veterans it serves.

After I began looking into the local issue at the St. Louis VA Medical Center, it came to my attention that this problem isn’t just a problem in our area. Upon further investigation, I found that a large number of VA Medical Centers have lacked a permanent director for quite some time. This problem is due to Office of Personnel Management (OPM) requirements which stipulate that temporary directors can serve for no more than 120 days, with a 240 day maximum total if their tenure is extended. The lack of stable, permanent leadership is no doubt one of the reasons the Department of Veterans Affairs has struggled to provide appropriate health care to those it serves.

H.R. 3956 seeks to fix this problem by requiring the VA Secretary to develop and implement a plan to fill these vacancies.

Specifically, my bill requires the Secretary of the Department of Veterans’ Affairs to:

- Report to the House and Senate Committees on Veterans’ Affairs the status of any unfilled vacancies.

- To develop and submit to Congress a plan hire highly qualified medical directors for each VA Medical Center which lacks a permanent director. This plan must be submitted within 120 days after enactment of the bill.
- Identify possible impediments to staffing VA Medical Centers with permanent directors.
- Assess the possibility of promoting and training qualified candidates from within the Department of Veterans' Affairs for promotion to these Senior Executive Service (SES) positions.

I have reached out to my local Congressional colleagues on the issue and sent letters to the Department regarding the lack of leadership at the St. Louis VAMC. Last week, I received a reply from the Department of Veterans Affairs Under Secretary of Health, Dr. David Shulkin, giving me an update on the issue. According to the timeline chart he provided, the St. Louis position has been vacant since July 14, 2013 and is still vacant thirty-three months later. I have enclosed a copy of the St. Louis VA Medical Center director timeline with my formal statement to illustrate just how long this process has been and how long this critical leadership position has been vacant.

This problem doesn't end in St. Louis. Unfortunately, similar scenarios can be found at Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Centers across the country. As of July 2015, the VA reported that over 39 VAMCs were without a permanent director. H.R. 3956 would help correct this lack of permanent leadership at the health care centers that so many of our nation's veterans rely on.

I thank the Chairman, Ranking Member, and this Subcommittee for consideration of H.R. 3956 and look forward to working with my colleagues and the Committee to further this legislation. Thank you and I yield back the balance of my time.