

**STATEMENT OF
REPRESENTATIVE DEREK KILMER (WA-06)
FOR THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH
OF THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
CONCERNING
H.R. 1066, THE VA MANAGEMENT ALIGNMENT ACT**

SEPTEMBER 26, 2017

Thank you Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Brownley, and members of the Subcommittee. I appreciate the opportunity to join you today to discuss how we can improve the operations of the Veterans Administration so those who have served our nation actually get the care they have earned.

I have the honor of representing more than 82,000 veterans, more than most any other member of my party and one of the largest concentrations in the House of Representatives. In my region we know that those who have served, and their families, have made tremendous sacrifices for us. We know they have had our backs. And we understand we should have theirs too. That means if you fight for your country you shouldn't have to fight for a job. In the land of the free and the home of the brave, every veteran should have a home. And anywhere in our country if you are a veteran, you should have access to the benefits you've earned.

That last point is what brings me here today. It's a conversation we've been having for far too long. I've heard it in VA halls, in the grocery store, and from members of my Veterans Advisory Council – why can't we fix the VA once and for all? Why does it take so long to see a practitioner, why do folks in smaller towns have to travel so far to get served? These questions have arisen because of the inability of veterans to schedule appointments, the difficulty to build a new Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) in my district, and other issues. And they are symptoms of a larger problem – systemic management challenges at the VA.

I appreciate all this committee and Congress has done to deliver answers to veterans like those I represent. I'm glad we've passed legislation seeking information, providing enhanced authorities, funding, and calling for accountability. But we all know there is more work to do.

In 2013, I partnered with then Ranking Member Brown and eventually Chairman Miller to request the Government Accountability Office (GAO) conduct a management review of the Veterans Health Administration. In our minds, this would help us get to the root of the problem.

The GAO team dove in, and what started with three reports on organizational structure, human capital, and information technology has expanded to more than six. These findings have begun to see the light of day and are accompanied by specific solutions to fix the problems GAO found.

One of the key findings that stood out is that – after a number of reviews from both within and outside the VA – there was a clear menu of recommendations to fix things for the better. These specific recommendations included clarifying different responsibilities between local and national facilities, evaluating if core duties were being met, and improving services, planning, and communications. But the GAO found these recommendations were never implemented.

That is not fair to veterans, the staff that conducted the reviews, or the taxpayers who paid for them.

Moreover, the VHA struggles to implement new policies and procedures due to a severe lack of clarity regarding the roles, missions, and accountability of senior leaders and organizations within the agency. The scale of the VA is so large that we need to go beyond position descriptions and office missions. There has to be a clear, transparent, and enforced relationship between the leaders and layers of the VA. How can we expect leaders and staff at more local levels to seek opportunities for collaboration and efficiency if there is not a clear understanding of how they are supposed to work together to care for veterans? We need all the rowers in the boat paddling in the same direction – not beating each other over the heads.

I introduced the VA Management Alignment Act to make sure we follow through on the GAO findings. This bill simply requests the Secretary of VA to provide a report to Congress within 180 days on the organizational structure of the VA. Specifically, the bill would require the Secretary to outline the roles, responsibilities, and accountability measures of senior leaders and branches of the VA informed by existing recommendations on the matter, and to provide Congress with a series of legislative options to assist the Secretary in realizing positive change.

Before coming to Congress, I worked as a management consultant to large private sector companies and for a county wide economic development agency. My experience in both roles led me to understand that good management requires clarity from the top. To do that we need to better measure outcomes. We need to work collaboratively with the administration to set an environment for success. This bipartisan bill, which was drafted in consultation with GAO, meets both of those tests.

It is also important to note that the VA Management Alignment Act is supported by the American Legion and the American Federation of Government Employees. I am grateful that the largest veterans' service organization and the federal employee union have joined me in this effort.

As this is a legislative hearing and not a markup, I request that we continue to work together to move this policy forward. I am with you in the effort to improve the VA and turn our words into deeds.

Again, I appreciate the opportunity to join you here today and look forward to working with you honor the service and sacrifices of our nation's veterans.