

VA Committee Legislative Hearing – June 13, 2018
Congresswoman Vicky Hartzler (MO-4)

- Chairman Roe, Ranking Member Walz, and distinguished members of the committee, thank you for allowing me this time to testify about HR 5521, The VA Hiring Enhancement Act.
- Our veterans deserve the best. Unfortunately, top-notch care is often hampered by a shortage of doctors at the VA. I believe that this bill, which I introduced along with Congressmen Correa and Congressman Bost will help the VA to fill some of these vacancies.
- Our bill has three main provisions. First, it would allow physicians to be released from non-compete agreements only for the purpose of serving in the VA for at least one year. Non-compete agreements are supposed to prevent a physician from building up a patient base, and then taking those patients with them as they set up their own practice. A physician moving to the VA simply does not fit that description. This provision would ensure that a non-compete agreement is never used to keep a physician from serving veterans at a VA facility, and only applies to such a circumstance.
- Second, our bill updates the minimum training requirements for VA physicians. Completion of a medical residency is widely accepted as standard comprehensive training for clinical physicians in the United States. However, current law only requires that a physician be licensed in order to treat veterans. In the case of some medical specialties, the difference between licensing and completing residency can represent six years of training.
- Some have suggested that this provision would exacerbate the shortage of physicians at the VA by shrinking the pool from which the VA can hire. However, the VA currently hires almost exclusively those physicians which have completed residency training, so this provision would not result in such an impact.
- Others have rightly submitted that veterans are largely satisfied with the quality of care they receive at the VA. They therefore submit that we do not need to legislate a higher standard. I contend that as long as Congress sees fit to impose *any* standard on the VA regarding those caring for veterans, we have a duty to ensure that the standard is appropriate. Completion of residency training is *the* accepted standard in this nation, and we should

never expect veterans to accept anything less. This is a common-sense update to something federal law already addresses, and ensures that only fully trained physicians care for those who have served our nation.

- Finally, our bill would place veterans' hospitals on a level playing field with the private sector when it comes to recruiting timelines. Often, private sector health care providers begin recruiting medical residents as they begin their final year of residency, sometimes even earlier.
- Most residents have school debt they will need to start paying off—an average of \$190,000. During residency they treat patients and work upwards of 80 hours a week, sometimes with single shifts up to 28 hours. These residents—rightfully motivated to secure a post-residency job with better pay and better hours—often accept a solid job offer from the private sector before VA recruiters are able to get their recruiting process started.
- Our bill authorizes VA recruiters to make job offers to physicians up to 2 years prior to fulfilling all of the VA's requirements, contingent on meeting all requirements before they begin treating veterans. It offers job security to medical residents who want to work at the VA when they complete their training, and allows VA facilities and recruiters to shore up appointments further in advance, helping them to plan and forecast medical workforce needs.
- VA recruiters are already pitching a great opportunity for physicians, and we owe them policies that make them as competitive as possible with private sector recruiters. I believe that advancement of this legislation will help begin to fill the VA's many vacant health care positions.
- We've worked closely with this committee's staff, VA recruiters, and VSOs on this bill, and I'm pleased to report that it has garnered wide support, including formal endorsement from the American Legion and Paralyzed Veterans of America. It's my hope we can work together to move this bill to the House floor soon. Thank you again for allowing me this time, I yield back.