

I want to thank Chairwoman Brownley and Ranking Member Bergman for holding this important hearing on Patient Safety in VA healthcare facilities. As a practicing physician of 30 years, the health and well-being of my patients is of the utmost importance to me. Additionally, I represent over 89,000 veterans who use the various VA healthcare facilities in and around my district. I also spent three years as Chief of Staff of a 900 bed Level One trauma center, as well as a 10 hospital system, where we worked constantly on patient safety issues. So, like all of you, I am very concerned about patient safety. All of us know the physician's Hippocratic oath is "Do No Harm". Physicians go through years of extensive and rigorous training to ensure that to the best of our ability we "Do No Harm" to our patients. Getting into medical school in United States takes unparalleled work and dedication beginning as early as middle school. The Academic rigor in American medical schools is unmatched in this world. Physicians in this country without a doubt the finest healthcare providers in the world. They are the unquestionable leader of the American healthcare team. If we truly are to take the best care of our patients, with the complexity of medicine, we simply must have the most qualified individuals leading that team. It is this team-based, physician led, healthcare model that leads our Veterans to healthier outcomes.

Dr. Kroviak, Ms. Silas, Ms. Oshinaki, Dr. Cox, and Dr. Boyd as you know per the VA's website, the "Stop the Line" program is a VA-wide initiative that

empowers VHA employees to speak up if they see a risk to patient safety. It is my understanding that this program is one of VA's most important programs for whistleblowers.

This all leads me to a major issue of patient safety. That is the VA proposal to remove physician oversight from surgical anesthesia care in VA facilities. I will say as a surgeon of 30 years, this proposal honestly terrifies me. As a surgeon I am in charge of what happens on one side of the sterile drape and I do not have the ability to be concerned about what happens on the other side of the sterile drape where my anesthesiologist keeps the patient still and free from pain. I have worked closely with anesthesiologist and nurse anesthetists for my entire career. The operating room is run by a surgical and anesthetic team. The most qualified individual to lead those two teams are the two physicians involved. We deserve to give our patients, especially our veterans, the highest quality care possible and this can only be done by having the most qualified individuals provide their expertise in the operating room. More than 350 VA anesthesiologists, including ten from my state of North Carolina, have invoked "Stop the Line" on a memo related to removing physician anesthesiologists from surgical staffing models in VA facilities. These VA anesthesiologists wrote in part, "As Anesthesia Service Chiefs and Staff Anesthesiologists, patient safety is our highest priority, and we believe this change unnecessarily threatens the safe, high-quality care delivered to

our Veterans.” They invoked “Stop the Line” in May 2020, September 2020 and in February 2021 after Secretary McDonough was confirmed. More than one third of VA’s anesthesiologists signed this letter, including 154 anesthesiologists caring for Veterans living in the states represented on this committee. Mr. Chairman I would like to enter these documents for the record. ***Yield for Chairman***

For Dr. Kroviak, I would like to ask you open an Inspector General investigation to determine why it has been 8 months since Secretary McDonough received this whistleblower letter, which raised serious questions about the safety of Veterans’ health, that he has not responded to this very important. How can patient protections be taken seriously if more than 350 VA physicians’ whistleblower letters are being ignored? Seriously. Why are these physicians’ concerns not being addressed?

For Ms. Oshinaki: In your testimony, you touted the high quality and safety of health care within the VA system. I believe we have made great strides in this direction however this particular issue is taking a simply in the other direction. This is not in the best interest of our veterans. Why would you want to change the well documented anesthesia pathway to provide inferior care to our veterans? I think all of us want nothing but the best care for our brave men and women, but I believe removing physician oversight will jeopardize care for veterans.