Charles Rockefeller Testimony

Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen.

My name is Charles Rockefeller, and I am the Co-Founder and Head of Partnerships for CuraPatient. It is a real honor to have been included today in this very important discussion. By coincidence, I happen to feel more historically connected to the VA because I heard it being discussed at the dinner table since age 12. My father sat on the Senate VA committee for 30 years, either as a member or its Chairman. My other two co-founders are Long Nguyen, who has been supporting the US Government in its AI endeavors since its inception 20 years ago, and Dr. Siddhartha Mukherjee, a Pulitzer-Prize-winning oncologist who has long been a thought leader in healthcare. Together, we bring a well-rounded and unique perspective to the very real challenges healthcare professionals face every day. To help us realize our vision, we have assembled a team of veterans, scientists, artists, technologists, and healthcare professionals from all walks of life.

To the extent that it's possible, I'd like to express the level to which I appreciate how important, difficult, and Herculean this committee's work is. Even the very title of this hearing: "Artificial Intelligence at the VA: Exploring its Current State and Future Possibilities," accurately captures the nature of the field - the fact that it is a dynamic and developing technology. Even more important are the policy guidelines that the VA has implemented. These guard rails can ensure that the VA's AI follows the Executive Orders on the use of AI. In the following testimony, I will contribute to this topic from the perspective of an emerging high-tech company and from the perspective of spending the past five years in working with the VA to enable this vision.

To start, I will provide some background on our work - the primary impetus behind my co-founders' and my decision to start the company was that the WHO had just declared worker burnout an occupational phenomenon - in its 11th Revision of the International Classification of Diseases. This has been particularly evident in the healthcare field, where we have seen the challenges and tremendous burdens placed on our front-line workers, ultimately compromising their mission and support for their community. While this has been an age-old challenge, we are excited by how the use of AI in this space can dramatically impact the workforce and improve patient engagement and support.

<u>Some information about our technology and our platform:</u>

Our platform's features mostly fall into three categories and have been designed specifically to be able to support patients, providers, and administrators to deliver care efficiently and avoid it when not needed at healthcare units and beyond the traditional walls:

1. **Assisting patients** with a virtual patient companion to guide them through their care plan and help them recover beyond the walls of traditional healthcare settings.
2. **Empowering providers** to be able to do their jobs and understand the unique needs of the organizations while being able to focus on an individual patient with the relevant information at their fingertips
3. **Enabling administrators** to set up, plan, and schedule resourcing and enable programs to be implemented consistently and at scale

These features extend patient care beyond the hospital's four walls, creating seamless support for veterans. With recent advancements in AI, we have overcome some of the traditional hurdles of digital healthcare where it overwhelms our providers and staff - we are deploying it to help summarize the enormous volume of data into digestible formats and nudge patients and providers without overwhelming them. Again, this is directed towards the dual, hand-in-hand goals of increasing veterans' access while reducing staff burnout.

One of our first successes came while working with Operation Warp Speed, where we helped provide equitable access to critical care while also allowing our brave front-line workers relief to focus on the job at hand. Because everything was automated, the workers could go home exactly when their shift ended to be better rested for the next day. For the sites that didn't use our platform, the workers spent, on average, an hour and 43 minutes manually entering data into spreadsheets. Ours was uploaded immediately into the state health registry system. I'm proud to say that we received a Red Cross Heroes Award for this service.

With that as a foundation, I want to shift my focus to our work with the VA. It goes without saying that our veterans are beloved around the country - we also think that the VA itself should be a beloved entity. CuraPatient was first introduced to the VA NAII in 2019 when we won that year's Tech Sprint. I'm proud to say that we were deemed "The Future of Healthcare." <u>Today, I would like to highlight five key topics from our</u>

<u>experience with the VA, although there are many more, and each creates the foundation not just to innovate but do so responsibly and at scale:</u>

1. Data Privacy and Security: We cannot discuss the VA and our work with them without discussing privacy and data security. The focus and emphasis here from the VA have been nothing short of amazing - even in the face of tremendous pressure to rush milestones, the steady hand and continued discipline to ensure patient safety and privacy are admirable. Together, we have implemented 421 NIST security control - the highest standard in the industry, with independent 3rd party assessors and ongoing continuous monitoring. We now have a fully operational national High Impact Authorization to Operate (ATO) with a native patient app connected to wearables, a suite of machine learning tools, and bi-directional integrations into the six core VA systems - more on later. It has been a cross-functional effort with Charles Worthington, Angela Gant-Curtis, and their teams to move this down the field. Dr. Paul Tibbits and his team at OIT first helped us get started and navigated us in the right direction.

2. Seamless Integrated Veteran-Centric Experience: Our work is centered on creating a seamless and user-friendly experience for both veterans and VA staff, streamlining everything from branding to single sign-on for hassle-free data management. We're thrilled to report that we've successfully completed 5 out of our 6 targeted integrations, granting us the bi-directional ability to both read and write patient records, thus ensuring our technology is perfectly in sync with VA operations nationwide. These enhancements not only foster greater engagement between visits but also ensure that clinicians have the relevant information they need for every patient encounter, optimizing the flow of information. This progress significantly enhances the VA ecosystem by adding intuitive, easy-to-use features that improve efficiency without increasing the workload, demonstrating our commitment to advancing technology within the VA.

3. Clinical Application of AI: Our collaboration with the VA facilities in Long Beach and DC has been a cornerstone of our efforts, where established AI oversight committees and policies are already enhancing our work. Our technology's integration aims to extend veteran care beyond hospital boundaries, starting with addressing Long Covid. This condition, with its broad impact on the body, provides a unique opportunity for wide-ranging engagement using our solutions. Moreover, our technology is aptly designed to tackle various chronic conditions, and we're paving a path toward addressing cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, behavioral health, and cancer. The abundance of well-curated content and literature tailored for veterans has been particularly impressive, simplifying our task. It allows us to leverage our technology to maximize the benefits derived from these veteran-specific resources.

4. Responsible AI: These pilots will be deployed at the 4 NAII centers and will be available across the entire VA. The Long Beach VAMC and DC VAMC teams led the work on it. It enforces compliance with trustworthy principles as defined by EO 13960. It incorporates NIST AI RMF and all non-binding principles within the White House AI Bill of Rights. The team has stated that the AI system we created, Curapatient, shall only move forward with the full approval of these bodies. They will prove that our technology can scale while emphasizing the importance of engagement and interaction - the more it is used, the smarter it becomes. As I mentioned earlier, AI is the most profound technology that has come to bear in the last 25 years and is the culmination of generations of scientists, mathematicians, etc. It also represents the greatest opportunity to address the challenges of burnout and access.

5. Contracting: We're optimistic about the benefits of enhancing our contracting approach, which promises to be a positive change. As technology, especially AI, advances rapidly, navigating the complexities of traditional contracting becomes a growing challenge. Often, by the time Firm Fixed Price contracts are executed, the technology has already advanced significantly. To stay aligned with these fast-paced technological changes and avoid administrative delays, it's vital to consider alternative contracting methods. Such strategies will keep the VA at the cutting edge, ensuring we deliver responsible and effective solutions. Moreover, gaining Congressional support for the necessary funding is critical to transforming these opportunities into real benefits for our Veterans. Inspired by the adaptable nature of AI, we aim to make our contracting processes equally flexible and responsive.

These 5 topics summarize our work and experience with the VA. In reflection of the past 4 years, we have a true appreciation of what it takes to be in the role of the VA leadership. The ability to be steadfast in the mission, while adapting and innovating to drive new technologies into the echo system. **More importantly, it has resulted in a soon-to-be mission ready system that can greatly apply advancements in AI not in theory only, but directly to our veterans and the staff that supports them in their journeys.** While change may not always come quickly, the breadth of our impact is undeniable, reaching millions of veterans and staff. Dr. Clancy's leadership has been a guiding light, and we're energized by our current state and look forward to getting our hard work out into veteran's hands across the country.

In closing, I urge the committee to recognize the critical importance of directing additional funding toward operationalizing AI and turning these groundbreaking ideas into tangible actions. Such investment will not only reinforce the VA's pivotal role in advancing innovative technology. Still, it will also

significantly enhance the care and services provided to our veterans, benefiting our nation as a whole. It's important, however, that we continue to approach this with a mindset geared towards responsible implementation and scaling. Our experiences underscore the VA leadership's commitment to thoughtful action, having set a strong foundation that enables us to pursue our goals effectively and on a broad scale, thus ensuring a widespread positive impact.

The very fact that we are all, in a small way, helping to carry out the words of Abraham Lincoln on the plaque outside the entrance of VA HQ at 811 Vermont Avenue is humbling to us.

Along the way we have witnessed some of most effective aspects of the inner workings of the VA as well as some of the less effective ones - some of the examples we have seen are:

-   Bilateral partnerships between its divisions have been very effective.

-   The efforts that have been put in place will be a big force multiplier (across medical conditions and diseases.)

-   We do think that some of the administrative items and the various silos to be navigated have been too burdensome but we always work through it.

-   We have made cuts in the past to accommodate for these periods, but I am concerned that the VA could be depriving itself of new input and opportunities from other private companies who simply can't wait as long as we did. There was a time or two when we even wondered if we could keep it up. Too many others would just throw up their hands and walk away, and the VA could have lost good talent and ideas.

-   When industry falls in line, others will follow and want to work with the VA - so that their work can be done in the right way. This would allow us to continue innovating and working on the best product instead of re-doing a lot of applications.

-   The role that public/private partnerships play is utterly important and should be facilitated as much as possible. I have seen from other hearings that the VA is very open to new ideas, and even the occasional critical remarks. We at CuraPatient have also taken some criticism, but the important thing is

that we are both in the mindset that we want to improve so we can serve our veterans as well as possible.

- And within the VA, a renewed focus should be on making the process faster to get from the pilot stage to operational stage. We actually see that as an important part of our role and hope that the work we have done will be implemented going forward. Part of my job today as a witness is to emphasize that point to you and make sure you have the very latest commentary from the field. To simplify and clarify everything we do, we always put it through the lens of "How do we get this into more people's hands?"

- An idea to consider: There should be someone assigned as a central project coordinator or watcher/observer to make sure that the various different departments within the VA are all synced up on the status of applications. At times we felt on our own or isolated and we didn't know who to call or write to ask basic things.

- An idea about how our and others' contracts might be more efficient: For example, the VA leases Microsoft Office. An aspect of that lease is that it is possible to add/contract line items along the way. Make fixes and additions along the way instead of redoing the entire contract.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for listening today. I appreciate your time, and, if you wish, please feel free to contact me going forward. Whatever I can do to further this cause, consider me to be at your service.