

**STATEMENT OF
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**BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS
AND
THE WOMEN VETERANS TASK FORCE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

July 22, 2020

Good afternoon Chairman Pappas, Chairwoman Brownley, Ranking Member Bergman and Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) commitment to a safe and welcoming environment for all visitors and employees. I am joined today by Mr. Daniel R. Sitterly, Assistant Secretary for Human Resources and Administration/Operations, Security and Preparedness, Dr. Patricia Hayes, Chief Consultant for Women's Health Services in the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and Ms. Lelia Jackson, Senior Strategist for the Office of the VHA Chief of Staff.

It is critically important to the Secretary, to me, and VA's entire leadership team that all our Veterans, visitors and employees feel welcome and safe at all VA facilities. This includes an environment free from incidents of all types of harassment, including sexual and discriminatory harassment. As Secretary Wilkie emphasized during his first few weeks as Secretary, and again in December in his annual message to all staff, VA will not tolerate behaviors that create an intimidating, offensive or hostile environment. As a Veteran who uses VA health care myself, ensuring our VA facilities are welcoming and safe is a personal issue for me as well.

This year, VA submitted to Congress the largest budget in the history of this department, \$240 billion dollars. This is to affirm the great service that VA employees provide to the nearly nine and a half million American Veterans enrolled in VA health care, as well as the broad range of services and programs that VA provides to millions of Veterans and their survivors. We provided that service during a transformative period for VA in which we have delivered on the Colmery Act, Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act, MISSION Act and CARES Act.

During COVID-19, VA has continued to serve Veterans, their families, caregivers and beneficiaries through a record-breaking expansion of our telehealth appointments and other outreach and access initiatives. In June 2020 alone, VA supported over half a million telehealth visits, compared to just over 41,000 visits in January 2020. VA filled a critical role in assisting the Nation's response to COVID-19. VA provided critical support

in communities in the form of medical/surgical treatment; intensive care; and long-term care beds for those not otherwise eligible for care; long-term care support to State Veterans Homes and other Long-Term Care facilities; and clinical and auxiliary staff augmentation to States in need. VA is providing humanitarian assistance and clinical staff augmentation in support of the Navajo Nation and Indian Health Service and continues to provide a myriad of support from equipment to alternate care sites and outreach to homeless Veterans.

Secretary Wilkie continues to emphasize that customer service is one of his overarching priorities, and that priority has been embedded in the culture of VA today. Our Department's focus on customer service is not just for the Veterans that we serve, but also for the employees that we support and serve. We are committed to ensuring that everyone who walks into a VA office or facility experiences a safe and welcoming environment, both physically and mentally.

We see validation of that culture-shift in both our external Veteran trust surveys and our internal employee surveys. In June 2020, we announced that overall Veteran trust in VA reached 80% in April 2020, reflecting a 19-point increase since January 2017. Additionally, Veteran trust in VA outpatient health care reached 90% for the first time on April 12, 2020. VA also ranked 6 out of 17 large Federal agencies for 2 consecutive years as a best place to work, a marked improvement from just over 2 years ago when VA ranked second-to-last.

Our Veterans are coming to us in numbers that are unprecedented in our history. Countless men and women serving this great Nation risked their lives "for the sake of the Union" - for the promise of freedom, justice and liberty for all - regardless of race, color, national origin, sex (including gender identity) or sexual orientation. Our Nation has seen an increase in the number of women volunteering to serve in the Armed Forces, which has led to an increase in women Veterans. At VA we are seeing increases in the percentage of women Veterans enrolled and receiving VA health care.

Women are not only coming to VA for services, they are coming to VA to lead. They make up 60% of our workforce and 30% of our women employees are Veterans. We have women across the Department, and at all levels, helping to shape this organization.

Regarding our Veteran population, our latest data show that at the end of fiscal year 2019, a record 41% of women Veterans were enrolled in VA health care, compared to 46% of men Veterans. We now have about 800,000 women enrolled, and we care for more than 550,000 women - more than triple the number we cared for two decades ago. Women Veterans who are enrolled in VA health care are a more diverse population than male Veterans - 44% of enrolled women Veterans are "other than white."

It is imperative that VA is prepared to serve this very diverse population, and we are seeing signs that we are on the right path. The overall trust women Veterans have

in the service they receive across VA rose 12 points since the end of 2017 and now sits at an all-time high of 75%. Regarding outpatient health care services, women Veterans' trust scores rose to 87.7%, from 81.3% at the end of 2017. To see those numbers rise so dramatically is an affirmation of how well we have advanced as a culture; however, there is certainly room for improvement and VA continues to push for more progress.

VA takes all reports of harassment and sexual assault incidents seriously and investigates each incident thoroughly and individually, enforcing the laws and VA policies to the maximum extent possible, in the best interests of our Veterans, their families, our staff and volunteers. This is true regardless of whether a report is made by a Veteran, a VA employee, or a visitor to a VA facility.

VA has shown its commitment to preventing sexual harassment and assault in concrete ways. VA continues to make significant strides in enhancing the language, practice and culture of the Department to be more inclusive of women Veterans. VHA leadership appointed a Senior Advisor for Assault and Harassment Prevention to review existing safety policies and programs for opportunities to strengthen and clarify where needed. Last fall, VHA released a "Stand Up to Stop Harassment Now" declaration outlining VHA's commitment to a harassment-free environment for everyone. This campaign includes leadership activities at VA medical centers and increased training for staff to ensure they are aware of inappropriate behavior and have the tools to stop it, report it and prevent it. It also includes educational tools for Veterans and visitors on how to treat women with respect in our facilities.

Additional events will roll out regularly in 2020. One important area of focus is bystander training. A contract was awarded on July 1, 2020, for Bystander Intervention Training to provide staff with tools to encourage and develop greater bystander involvement to prevent harassment and assault. This virtual training will be available at all VHA facilities beginning in September 2020.

In 2019, VHA established a Harassment and Assault Policy and Reporting Task Force, which is an interdepartmental and multidisciplinary workgroup designed to improve our system of reporting and tracking harassment and assault, and to improve the services we offer to victims of mistreatment. As part of this effort, we launched a Sexual Assault Incident Reporting Dashboard to track, trend and identify process and procedural gaps and areas for improvement in VA health care facilities. We plan to expand this beyond VHA in 2021 to include tracking and reporting across the entire Department.

With regard to the June 2020 report issued by the General Accountability Office (GAO) on sexual harassment policies at VA, (GAO-20-387, "SEXUAL HARASSMENT: Inconsistent and Incomplete Policies and Information Hinder VA's Efforts to Protect Employees"), we have concurred on virtually all of GAO's recommendations and are in the process of improving and updating our policies and procedures to ensure that they are current, complete and aligned with VA's sexual harassment policy. We are working with other parts of the Department, including the Veterans Benefits Administration and

VHA, to ensure that VA's Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) programs are properly aligned to carry out effective EEO programs. We are coordinating efforts for a new Harassment Prevention Program Directive and Handbook, enhancing systems for sharing information, and restructuring sexual harassment prevention training programs.

Our military paved the way for me to become the Chief of Staff, and now the Acting Deputy Secretary for VA, after serving 30 years in the United States Air Force. This is our Veterans' VA. We are here to care for all of our Nation's heroes whose service and sacrifice inspires us all. That is our important and non-negotiable mission, entrusted to us by the President, Congress and this Committee. I look forward to working with each of you on this Committee on opportunities to enhance VA's environment to be safe and welcoming for all.

This concludes my testimony. My colleagues and I are prepared to respond to any questions you may have.