

**STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE ROBERT L. WILKIE
SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**

BEFORE THE

**HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE, SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY
CONSTRUCTION, VETERANS AFFAIRS, AND RELATED AGENCIES**

**DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
RESPONSE TO THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC**

MAY 28, 2020

Chairwoman Wasserman Schultz, Judge Carter, and members of the subcommittee who are with us both here and remotely. I am accompanied today by Dr. Paul Lawrence, Under Secretary for Benefits, Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA); Jon Rychalski, Assistant Secretary for Management and Chief Financial Officer; and Dr. Jennifer MacDonald, Chief Consultant to the Under Secretary for Health.

Military experts have said for years that future wars will be fought by machines, not people.

I'm here to tell you they were wrong. Right now, thousands of dedicated VA employees are fighting a war in America that none of us would have predicted just a few short months ago.

Our doctors, nurses and supporting staff are routinely putting their lives on the line and sacrificing time with their families to care for Veterans, most of whom are older and are therefore more vulnerable to the virus.

31 of our staff members have died serving Veterans, and as you know we have lost hundreds of Veteran patients to this disease.

But the news is not all grim. From the start VA took an aggressive posture to protect our patients from COVID-19, and our staff has worked tirelessly to carry it out, with great success.

Here's where we stand today:

We have diagnosed more than 11,200 Veterans with the virus, but 75 percent of them are 14 days past their last positive test and recovering at home.

- We're treating about 1,600 patients for the virus today.

- We are well-stocked with supplies. On average, VHA has a minimum of 2 weeks' supply on hand of each type of PPE (gloves, eye protection, masks, gowns and hand sanitizer) within most facilities.
- We are well-staffed, in part because we surge-hired more than 10,000 medical staff in an effort to stay ahead of the problem.
- But overall, our infection rate among VA staff is incredibly low compared to other health care systems, less than one half of one percent, and in addition to our staff, I credit all the steps we took early in this crisis to protect Veterans.
- For example, VA activated its emergency management procedures the day after the first case of the virus was confirmed in Washington State.
- We began carefully managing our supplies of PPE and other medical equipment, developed guidance on how staff can mitigate the spread of COVID-19, and expanded our tele-health services in anticipation of social distancing measures all while there were still less than 50 confirmed cases in this country.
- In March we took steps to ensure we could surge our staff as needed
- And by April we were working on our Fourth Mission in earnest – taking in non-Veteran patients in hotspots, and deploying VA staff to nursing homes and state Veterans homes that needed our expertise, an issue I know some of you will want to talk about today.

In addition to the work being done by our health care staff, our Veterans Benefits Administration has reached out to more than 400,000 Veterans and counting to talk about our response and answer questions about their benefits during the crisis. Additionally, our National Cemetery Administration has taken steps to ensure loved ones are interred in a respectful but safe manner.

I'll stop there, but I want to reiterate what I said at the top, which is that I cannot be more proud to lead such a dedicated staff during this time of crisis.

Our staff have turned VA into a learning organization that was able to turn on a dime and transform before our very eyes to keep both Veterans and non-Veterans safe during a time of incredible uncertainty, and they are leaders in this fight against the invisible enemy.

Thank you.