

WRITTEN STATEMENT OF  
REP. ADAM SMITH  
CONGRESSMAN OF THE 9<sup>th</sup> DISTRICT WASHINGTON

BEFORE THE  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS,  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

“Member’s Day Hearing”

Wednesday, May 16, 2018

Thank you Chairman Roe, Ranking Member Walz, and Members of the House Veterans Affairs Committee for the opportunity to share my constituents’ perspectives about the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and its care of our country’s veterans. In particular it is critical that this committee understand the impacts of its decisions and federal policy on individual VA facilities and the veterans they serve. As the committee continues its work to improve the care and services provided by VA medical centers throughout the United States, I appreciate the opportunity to share some of the insights and challenges that my constituents have observed and experienced while working with and being served by the Veterans Affairs Puget Sound Health Care System (VAPS), which is located in the congressional district I represent.

While I am happy that many of my constituents are today satisfied with the level of service at VAPS, that has not always been the case. For multiple years, VAPS went without a permanent director who had the authority to approve personnel changes, make capital improvements, and address numerous deficiencies identified by the staff and patients to the administrative team. When I learned about these problems at VAPS, I reached out the Washington, DC offices of the VA to find and implement solutions to the issues that VAPS faced. Although my requests for a management assessment team to be sent to VAPS were initially met with resistance, I eventually I found and began working with a strong and solutions-focused partner in then-Under Secretary David Shulkin.

Working with Secretary Shulkin, the VA dispatched a “Tiger Team” from Washington, DC in March 2017 to engage with stakeholders in the local veterans’ community and begin to propose fixes to the systemic problems at VAPS. Following the adoption of the Tiger Team’s recommendations, and under the leadership of Director Michael Tadych, VAPS saw substantial improvement in services and efficiency. The turnaround at the VAPS can be attributed in large part to stable and steady leadership. It is important that mistakes and complications stemming from a lack of leadership not be repeated or allowed to continue anywhere in the VA system. Our nation’s veterans need and deserve stable and steady leadership throughout the Department.

VAPS serves veterans from across the State of Washington who look to it for critical medical and housing services. VAPS is also home to several cutting edge medical research centers, including the Mental Illness Research, Education and Clinical Center; a Center of Excellence for Limb Loss Prevention and

Prosthetics Engineering; a Center for Substance Abuse Treatment and Education; and an Alzheimer's Research Center. While I am proud of the research and the work that is being done at VAPS, there are critical issues that deserve the committee's attention.

The Ninth Congressional District of Washington is one of the most diverse in the United States and I am very proud to represent all who reside in it. To better serve veterans from all backgrounds, Congress and the VA should prioritize the hiring of mental health professionals who can better relate to the life experiences of the diverse range of individuals who have served our country. Veterans have reported to me that it is easier to engage, work with, and trust mental health professionals who come from similar backgrounds and experiences, and can best empathize with veterans.

Women are the fastest growing demographic of veterans in my district as well as the whole country. In Congress, we should prioritize giving VA medical centers, like VAPS, the flexibility to better provide for the gender-specific needs of women veterans, such as having separate waiting rooms and more privacy for women's clinics in VA facilities.

Veteran homelessness is also a key concern. The Puget Sound region is fortunate to have many volunteers and multiple service organizations that are dedicated to assisting veterans in finding housing and overcoming unemployment. Unfortunately, obstacles to combating veteran homelessness remain; including mental health and substance abuse challenges, as well as a lack of affordable housing in our region. Some veterans who are assisted by the VA in securing housing end up losing their homes because their mental health or substance abuse issues were not adequately addressed. Congress must continue to support wrap-around services for homeless veterans and bolster flexible housing vouchers to accommodate regions, like mine, that are experiencing high or rapidly rising rents.

Concerns around vacancies at VA facilities have also been brought to my attention. There are approximately 942 vacancies in VA facilities across Washington State, with the large majority of those located within VAPS. Despite the good work that is being done within the system, VAPS employees could deliver better service to veterans if the medical center was fully staffed. To provide the best care for our nation's heroes, Congress needs to assist the VA in achieving and maintaining full employment of medical and support staff at VA medical centers.

There is still much work to be done to improve the quality and efficiency of the medical care that is provided by the VA. I look forward to continuing to work with the Members on this Committee and our colleagues in the U.S. House and Senate to support our country's veterans and honor the noble sacrifices for our freedom and nation. Thank you.