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SENIOR CHIEF DEPUTY
DEMOCRATIC WHIP

COMMITTEE ON
WAYS AND MEANS

CHAIRMAN
OVERSIGHT SUBCOMMITTEE

JOINT COMMITTEE
ON TAXATION



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**TESTIMONY OF REP. JOHN LEWIS (D-GA) ON “BROKEN PROMISES: ASSESSING
VA’S SYSTEMS FOR PROTECTING VETERANS FROM CLINICAL HARM”
HOUSE VETERANS AFFAIRS SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND
INVESTIGATIONS**

October 16, 2019

Good afternoon, Chairman Pappas, Ranking Member Bergman, and Members of the Subcommittee.

Thank you for inviting me to testify on this important matter. I am grateful that the Subcommittee is holding this hearing. It is critical that safe, quality, consistent, compassionate patient care become a top priority at all VA Medical Centers. A United States Veteran should never experience what Airman Joel Marrable and his family endured.

The Atlanta Veterans Affairs Health Care System (VAMC) is one of the largest in the country. In Atlanta alone, there are more 18,000 Veterans, who may rely on the services provided at VA medical facilities. The Atlanta VAMC is one of eight Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical facilities that comprise the VA Southeast Network. This expansive network serves 1.4 million Veterans in Georgia, South Carolina, and Alabama. This is the third largest veteran population in the country.

Many Veterans throughout the region rely on the Atlanta VAMC to provide general and service-related health care. Located in Decatur, Georgia, the Atlanta VAMC oversees community-based clinics and health facilities throughout Metro Atlanta and surrounding areas. The Eagle’s Nest Community Living Center is one of several facilities in the VA Southeast Network responsible for providing Veterans with long term care. Fulfilling their mission should require the highest level of attentive and empathetic care.

The importance of these facilities and the expectation of quality, safe care are the reasons that Air Force Veteran, and cancer patient, Joel Marrable’s case is so horrific. When news broke last month detailing how Airman Marrable endured more than 100 ant bites while in care at the VAMC’s Eagles Nest Community Living Center, a facility in my district, I was disgusted and heartbroken.

I want you to close your eyes. Imagine that after serving your nation around the world, you face the greatest battle of your life – the fight against cancer. It is a constant struggle, and the pain seems insurmountable. When you feel as if the suffering could not get any worse, you are attacked by an infestation of ants -- covering your body and your room, biting you constantly -- as you fight for your life.

This is what Airman Marrable endured. This is how a daughter discovered her father. This was their lasting memory of Atlanta VAMC. The staff told his daughter, Ms. Laquana Ross, that they thought her father passed away because of the magnitude of ants covering his body. I cannot comprehend how a person could be so neglected that the staff could not tell if he was still alive.

The record should be clear – the Atlanta VAMC failed Airman Marrable in his final days. It was Ms. Ross who discovered that her father was still alive and still fighting for his life. It was Ms. Ross who insisted that her father to receive the care and dignity that he deserved in his final hours. A clean room, a bathed body, a bed without biting bugs, and regular health checks are not extraordinary expectations. These are the basics, and the VAMC failed to provide them.

In Airman Marrable's last days, his family could not even comfort him without causing pain. Ms. Ross recalled that her father was in so much agony from the ant bites that he would flinch whenever she touched his swollen hands. Mr. Chairman, these were his final moments. This was the care that his government gave Airman Marrable as he transitioned from this world.

When something is not right, it is our duty as Members of Congress to speak up and speak out. We have a moral obligation to do what is just and what is fair. Mr. Chairman, I shared my concerns with Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary, Robert Wilkie, and Ms. Ann Brown, the Director of the Atlanta VA healthcare system in a letter, which I would like to submit for the record. I am here today, because I want to ensure that what Airman Marrable endured never occurs again. He deserved better, and his country failed him and his family in their time of need.

The men and women who serve and sacrifice for our country deserve exceptional care from an agency and their contractors whose sole purpose is to care for those who valiantly protected our nation. I am grieved by the inept response and negligence surrounding Airman Marrable's care. It is appalling to know that in his last days, Airman Marrable and his family were left to resolve this crisis when they should have been afforded the opportunity to cherish their last precious moments together.

Throughout my congressional district, Veterans are an integral part of the fabric of our community. These patriots put their lives on the line and their family, friends, and personal ambition on the back burner as they serve our nation. They work, live, and contribute to the vibrancy of our country and deserve the highest level of respect and care.

Mr. Chairman, similar to many congressional offices, the majority of my office's constituent casework concerns Servicemembers, Veterans, and their families. Upon hearing of this horrific case, my District Office caseworkers began a desperate search to provide support and solace to Airman Marrable and his family. We extended our deepest condolences and ensured that the Marrable family knew that our office was a resource in their darkest hour.

The challenge of timely, quality, consistent service at VA facilities remains constant and widespread. My caseworkers are constantly fielding stories from frustrated and distraught constituents and their families. There is a sense of disarray and a lack of appreciation for the important work of VA patient advocates, who are key intermediaries between congressional offices, the VA, and the Veterans. Responses to congressional inquiries languish, and those caseworkers and advocates who dedicate their careers to serving United States' Veterans and Servicemembers increasingly feel hopeless.

I believe that the commitment to the health and well-being of our Veterans takes priority over politics and party lines. We must demonstrate that the sacrifices made by these brave men and women were not in vain. These women and men sacrificed selflessly, and their country's appreciation should be proudly displayed by the quality of care at every VA Medical Facility.

As a nation and as a people, we can do better, and we must do better. The care our Veterans receive is a direct reflection of how our nation shows gratitude to those who fight bravely to preserve our freedoms. Compassion, empathy, and respect should be our compass, our mission, and our mandate. At every opportunity, we should work tirelessly to correct the errors and shortcomings of the systems upon which they rely and strengthen the agency to support future generations of Veterans and their families.

Again, I thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to testify this afternoon.

JOHN LEWIS
5th District, Georgia

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September 17, 2019

The Honorable Robert Wilkie
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary Wilkie,

I write to thank you for speaking with me regarding preliminary actions to ensure that what Mr. Joel Marrable, an Air Force Veteran, and his family experienced at Eagles' Nest Community Living Center in Decatur, Georgia, never occurs again.

As you know, reports surfaced last week that Airman Marrable's family discovered their beloved patriarch covered with ants and over 100 bites in his room at the Eagle's Nest Community Living Center, a part of Atlanta VA Medical Center in Decatur, Georgia. Sadly, Airman Marrable passed away from cancer shortly afterwards. It is unacceptable that in the days before his death, Airman Marrable endured preventable pain and suffering.

Family members should trust their government to care properly for their loved ones. The reported infestation, living conditions, and atrocious care are inexcusable. The abysmal care that he received in his final days did not reflect the significance of his life and our appreciation for his service to our nation.

The men and women who serve, protect, and sacrifice for our country deserve exceptional medical care. Veterans and their families should receive respect and exemplary care and services from an agency and their contractors whose sole purpose is to care for those who valiantly served our nation.

The negligence and inept response surrounding this incident are alarming and unacceptable. I look forward to a continued updates on this grave matter and information on plans to ensure that Veterans in Metro Atlanta receive the quality of care that they earned and merit.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "John Lewis". The signature is stylized and written in a cursive-like font.

John Lewis
Member of Congress

Secretary Wilkie
Ms. Brown
September 17, 2019
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cc: The Honorable Johnny Isakson, Chair, Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
The Honorable Mark Takano, Chair, House Committee on Veterans' Affairs