

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 15, 2014

The Honorable Robert McDonald  
Secretary  
Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary McDonald,

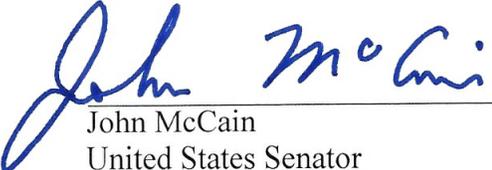
As the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), you face the difficult task of repairing the agency responsible for providing our nation's veterans with the care they earned and deserve. As you know, over a month ago, the President signed the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act. But, to date, no guidelines have been issued and no plan of action or associated milestones announced that would ensure that our veterans will receive the care they need through the Choice Card—as required under the new law. Senior VA leaders have, likewise, not been held accountable for delaying and denying patient care, silencing and intimidating whistleblowers, and enriching themselves by manipulating wait-time statistics to receive undeserved performance bonuses. When the Senate confirmed you to your current post, you committed to making a difference at, and changing the culture of, the VA. To date, however, we believe that progress on this front has been insufficient.

Given the VA Inspector General's recent conclusions regarding the Phoenix VA Health Care System (PVAHCS) and the fact that the nationwide scandal facing the VA originated at Phoenix, I would expect that, at a minimum, the current leadership at PVAHCS is fully aware of how the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act impacts how they will be expected to deliver care for veterans in Arizona. However, as congressional staff learned during a recent visit, this is not the case. PVAHCS staff appear to be unaware of the impacts of this new legislation and stated that they had received no guidance from the VA leadership in Washington, DC on how to implement the provisions in this bill. Clearly, this situation must be remedied.

We urge you to immediately contact the PVAHCS staff and provide it and other VA medical facilities around the country guidance on how to implement the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act and, in particular, the Choice Card program, required under that law. Additionally, we stress the importance of taking swift action and using the authority Congress has provided you to quickly remove the senior leaders at the VA who perpetrated the scandal of denied and delayed care for our nation's heroes. Veterans rely on you to ensure that their need for care is being met and that you are fully utilizing the new authorities and funding Congress has entrusted to you. We believe that you must rise to meet these expectations.

With this information in mind, please provide answers to the following questions no later than September 30, 2014.

1. In order to successfully implement the Veterans Choice, Access, and Accountability Act, VA employees must have clear guidelines on how veterans can obtain and use the Choice Card.
  - a. When will the VA provide these guidelines to VA Medical Centers?
  - b. When will the Choice Card be available to veterans?
  - c. Please lay out, with specificity, your plan of action and associated milestones that will guide full and effective implementation of the Choice Card program.
  - d. What is the VA's media and outreach plan to educate and inform veterans of the VA Choice Card well before implementation? Exactly how does the VA plan to use a combination of letters, email, websites and social media, Veterans Service Organizations, and other means to successfully implement the VA Choice Card?
  - e. How will you prepare VA employees and call centers for an influx of veterans calling VA helplines or asking VA employees for information on the Choice Card?
  - f. How will the VA ensure that providers participating in this program are compensated within the 30 days required by law?
  - g. How will you ensure that veterans' medical records flow seamlessly between the VA and providers?
  
2. According to the IG's report, "PVAHCS senior administrative and clinical leadership were aware of unofficial wait lists and that access delays existed."
  - a. Have all the individuals who were aware of these unofficial wait lists and access delays been reprimanded? If not, why not?
  - b. Has there been a decision made regarding Sharon Helman's continued employment with PVAHCS? If not, why not?
  - c. When will you decide who the permanent medical director will be for PVAHCS?
  - d. The Veterans Choice, Access, and Accountability Act included authority for you to terminate the employment of senior executives for their lack of performance in their jobs. Have you exercised this special authority Congress granted you? If not, why not?

  
John McCain  
United States Senator

Sincerely,

  
Jeff Flake  
United States Senator