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**NOMINATION OF THE HONORABLE
PAUL LAWRENCE TO BE
DEPUTY SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**

HEARING
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES SENATE
ONE HUNDRED NINETEENTH CONGRESS
FIRST SESSION

FEBRUARY 19, 2025

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**NOMINATION OF THE HONORABLE
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WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 2025

U.S. SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC.

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 9:36 a.m., in Room SR-418, Russell Senate Office Building, Hon. Thom Tillis, presiding.

Present: Senators Tillis, Boozman, Cassidy, Blackburn, Tuberville, Banks, Sheehy, Blumenthal, Murray, Hirono, Hassan, King, Duckworth, Gallego, and Slotkin.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. THOM TILLIS,
U.S. SENATOR FROM NORTH CAROLINA**

Senator TILLIS. This hearing will come to order. I'm going to be filling in for Senator Moran who had logistics issues getting back to DC today, and I'm looking forward to considering the nomination of Paul Lawrence for Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

The role of Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs is important. Serving as the second in command, chief operating officer, and co-chair of the VA/DoD Joint Executive Council. The Deputy Secretary also oversees Electronic Health Record Modernization, and works with Secretary Collins to make certain that VA is high performing, accountable, fiscally responsible, and veterans-focused.

Dr. Lawrence was raised in an Army family, and is an Army veteran who knows firsthand what military service means, and the necessity of supporting veterans throughout their civilian lives. He's also familiar with many of us, given his prior service in the VA. He's familiar to many of us because he was the Under Secretary for Benefits, a position he held from 2018 until 2021.

During that time, the Veteran Benefits Administration had the lowest disability claims backlog in history and underwent significant reform as a result of legislation like the Forever GI Bill, the Appeals Modernization Act, and the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act.

I'm grateful to Dr. Lawrence for his willingness to once again step up and serve his fellow veterans in a leadership position at the VA, and I look forward to his testimony today. I also want to acknowledge the family members accompanying Dr. Lawrence this morning, which include his wife, Anne, his son, Gregory, and his

brother, Chris. If you can raise your hands? Thank you-all for being here.

And on a final note, there's a certain amount of pride that comes from the fact that we did cross paths not directly working together at PricewaterhouseCoopers, what I would consider to be an extraordinarily good experience for the sort of perspective that Mr. Lawrence should bring into the VA. And I look forward to seeing this engagement, Mr. Lawrence, like so many engagements you and I oversaw back in our time at PW.

With that, I'll yield a Ranking Member Blumenthal for his opening remarks.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. RICHARD BLUMENTHAL,
RANKING MEMBER, U.S. SENATOR FROM CONNECTICUT**

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you, Senator Tillis. And thanks for chairing this Committee, probably on short notice. Welcome, Dr. Lawrence, welcome to your family, and thank you for your willingness to serve in this very, very important position, for a second time, in a position critical to our Nation's veterans.

As you know, the Deputy Secretary is the department's second highest official tasked with executing VA's Electronic Health Record Modernization program, strengthening VA's collaboration with the Defense Department on the VA/DoD Joint Executive Committee, and many, many other critical responsibilities. While these formal roles are important, I'm more focused on your fitness to serve as the VA's chief operating officer, and your willingness to push back against recent directives that harm veterans and the mission of the VA.

During the nomination process for Secretary Collins, this Committee was assured veterans would always come first, and we were promised transparency and consultation even when we disagree with decisions being made. Now, the Chairman and I learn of far-reaching decisions after the fact, and almost always directly from the press, from VA employees, or from veterans, never from the VA leadership. And when we ask for reasonable questions about those decisions and their potential impact, we are directed toward non-answer press releases. But we get no responses at all.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to submit for the record a list of 22 unanswered requests for information that I've submitted to the VA since January 20th.

Senator TILLIS. Without objection.

[The list referred to appears on page 87 of the Appendix.]

Senator BLUMENTHAL. I would also like to submit for the record seven letters on urgent issues facing veterans care and benefits that I've sent to the administration, most with many of our colleagues joining, and that includes three to President Trump, four to Secretary Collins. None of these letters have received a response.

Senator TILLIS. Without objection.

[The letters referred to appear on pages 92–108 of the Appendix.]

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you. We've been told everything will be fine and no harm will come to veterans from the Trump and Musk slash and trash policies. But despite these vague assurances,

we know it's not the reality. In fact, because of the actions of this administration, we've been made aware of numerous detrimental developments across the country.

Openings for new clinics have been delayed because they can't hire the necessary staff to open their doors. Service lines at VA hospitals and clinics have been halted. Beds and operating rooms at VA hospitals have been reduced. Support lines for caregivers have been cut down. Veterans' crisis line employees have been fired. And suicide prevention training centers, that's right, suicide prevention training sessions have been postponed or canceled. It's incredible. Transportation options for disabled veterans have been reduced because volunteer drivers can't get credentialed.

The Secretary has also said Elon Musk has not and will not be granted access to veteran's personal information, but we know that is simply not true. Not only does Musk and his team have access to that information at Treasury, they have the ability to alter, yes, alter, that information. And it's only a matter of time until they access additional information on veterans from the VA or another agency.

This weekend, we learned the White House is attempting to grant access for a Musk employee to the IRS tax systems containing personal identification numbers and bank information of up to 150 million Americans, including veterans. Meanwhile, VA employees have been told there is nothing to fear. Nothing to fear as long as they work hard, but we know that's not true either.

Many have been pressured to abandon their jobs by Musk and his resignation offers that aren't based on reality or the law. More than 1,000 employees, including a substantial number of veterans, and those with exemplary performance records, were abruptly and illegally fired in a move that was publicly celebrated by the VA Secretary. This action was part of last week's broad purge of tens of thousands of workers across almost every government agency.

All employees should have options to appeal these decisions, but the President just illegally fired the chair of the Merit Systems Protection Board, the independent agencies established to protect the rights of federal employees. A district court judge reversed that termination, at least temporarily, just last night. They could appeal to the Independent Office of Special Counsel that spends one-third of its caseload on VA oversight and protecting whistleblowers. But the President fired its Senate-confirmed leader.

That dispute is now before the Supreme Court, but the President seems insistent on having the VA Secretary run that office in his spare time, running that office in addition to the VA, unacceptable. And they could flag potential ethic conflicts to the Office of Government Ethics. But that once independent agency is now also run by the VA Secretary. Another clear conflict of interest to all VA employees.

And I know a third of you are veterans. I know you've had your lives and your careers completely upended. We will keep fighting for you. You chose a career of serving veterans, and you deserve better than to be casually and unlawfully discarded by an administration that places greater priority on political loyalty than on fitness to serve. And to the veterans watching today, including any who have contacted us directly and are anxious about losing your

access to VA healthcare or your next benefits check, we hear you, we're going to keep fighting for you.

This administration may define collaboration as standing silently on the sidelines while they dismantle the VA, but we need to remind them that this Committee, this bipartisan Committee, has traditionally embodied the word collaboration coming from both sides of the aisle to pass historic legislation like the PACT Act on behalf of veterans and their families, standing up for their best interest every single time, and performing robust and vigorous oversight no matter who was in the White House.

I'm here for this fight, and I know my democratic colleagues are here for this fight. I just hope my Republican colleagues will join us before it's too late. I know oversight and transparency can be seen as threatening, especially when you're on the wrong side of the law and the wrong side of history, but the stakes are too high for any of us to be silent.

Dr. Lawrence, it's this context in which your nomination will be considered. We need to know how you plan to navigate these waters and whether you will actually put veterans first, stand up for them, and make sure that they receive what they have earned. It's not a gift, it's what they have earned. This Committee, VA employees, and the veterans across the country will be listening to you today.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator TILLIS. Mr. Lawrence, before I start with you. I want to respond, in part, to what my friend and Ranking Member has expressed. We're going through a transition now and there are decisions being made about probationary employees.

It's my understanding a good number of the people who have decided to leave were probationary employees. I've asked to get to the facts. I don't know about your training at PricewaterhouseCoopers, but mine taught me to be very fact-driven and boring. I like to focus on the specifics of the allegations, and I have done that over the past almost four weeks since some of the personnel moves have been made. And quite honestly, some of the reports or allegations on day one are disproven on day two.

I'll give you one example. If you remember in the first week, there was a discussion about Elon Musk having access to detailed payments data. Now, we know that's actually not true. That they were looking at code and the payment system to try and determine either efficiency or improper payments. I have done specific requests for access to that information. I haven't found anything to substantiate the allegations of two or three weeks ago.

This is a large organization. It has critical positions, and it has desirable, but maybe not critical positions. If we're suggesting here that we've had mass terminations of physicians, technicians, nurses, critical positions, then that would certainly be concerning. And if there is evidence to that effect, I would like to see it. But in the meantime, I think we're dealing with a lot of transition, a new way of looking at personnel management, which occurs when you have a transition in the White House.

I also think that we're talking about problems with the VA that were here more than 20 days ago. I think some of these problems are because there was a PACT Act that my office spent a lot of

time working on that didn't get the commitment to get it right before it was passed out. And it resulted in a \$3 billion shortfall in budgeting last year, and multi-billion this year. These are all decisions that were made by Congress that are undermining some of our ability to actually live up to repaying or making another installment on a debt that we can never fully repay for veterans who need our services.

And you as a veteran, Mr. Lawrence, I think you bring perspective based on your tenure in the VA. You bring the perspective of a veteran and you bring the kind of perspective that I believe is needed to even settle down and address, maybe, some of the legitimate concerns that were expressed by the Ranking Member.

But now, let's move on to your testimony. Before I do, if you'll please stand and raise your right hand. Dr. Lawrence, do you solemnly swear or affirm that the testimony you're about to give to the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs will be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Yes, I do.

Senator TILLIS. Thank you, Dr. Lawrence. You may be seated. You can continue and proceed with your testimony.

**STATEMENT OF HON. PAUL LAWRENCE, PHD, NOMINEE TO BE
DEPUTY SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**

Dr. LAWRENCE. Senator Tillis, Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to be here today and for considering my nomination. I would also like to thank President Trump for the honor of this nomination and his trust in me. Today, my objective is to earn your trust as well.

As Senator Tillis has pointed out, I'm joined by my wife, Anne, for 39 years, and my brother, Chris, also an Army Veteran and Airborne Ranger. I also want to thank my 100-year-old mother who's watching at home right now. I wouldn't be here without all their love and support.

The Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs has a long history of bipartisan accomplishments on behalf of America's veterans. Your commitment to taking care of the men and women who've worn the uniform is above reproach. I want you to know that I share that commitment.

I grew up in an Army family. My father served 24 years with deployments in the Korean and Vietnam wars. He taught me many valuable lessons about leadership and what it means to serve. My middle name, Reynold was given to me in honor of my uncle who was killed fighting in Normandy. My family's love of country and tradition of service compelled my brother and I to join the Army where we were both commissioned through ROTC. During my tenure in the military, I graduated from the Army's Airborne School, earned the Meritorious Service Medal, and rose to the rank of captain. My service taught me the value of leading with integrity, honor, and respect, but most importantly, instilled in me a dedication to serving my fellow veterans that has shaped my life's work.

As Senator Tillis indicated, I spent many years as a consultant bringing efficiencies to large organizations. Then, I had the opportunity during the first Trump administration to serve as VA's

Under Secretary for Benefits, one of the most rewarding experiences of my career. In that role, I led 24,000 employees as they administered the range of benefits including disability compensation, pension, education, home loans, veterans' readiness, and employment, and life insurance.

During my time at VA, our Veterans Benefits Administration team made great strides in increasing productivity, customer service, and convenience for veterans. Here are a few highlights of which I'm particularly proud. As Senator Tillis pointed out, during my time at VBA, the disability claims backlog was reduced to its lowest level ever. VBA guaranteed a record 1.2 million home loans to veterans in FY 2020, surpassing the previous record of 700,000. We successfully launched the GI Bill, the Appeals Modernization Act, and the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act. We successfully launched Solid Start and the Veterans Benefits Banking Program. BVA reduced improper payments by more than \$350 million. And in 2020, during the pandemic, I conducted 110 telephone town halls that reached 5.7 million people, and I took more than 1,500 unfiltered questions about how we are serving veterans.

If I have the privilege of returning to VA, I will work to build on the many bipartisan successes of this Committee. To that end, I pledge to work with you to get VA's Electronic Health Record Modernization effort back on track. Ensure VA provides veterans with the healthcare choices and options Congress promised them as part of the MISSION Act. Properly and faithfully implement the PACT Act. And put veterans at the center of everything the department does, and make accountability, customer service, and caring the cornerstone of service among the department's workforce.

If confirmed, I'll be a tireless advocate for the men and women who fought for our liberty. And I will work to ensure every eligible veteran and VA beneficiary gets the benefits and services they've earned.

Thank you, and I'm happy to take your questions.

[The prepared statement of Dr. Lawrence appears on page 43 of the Appendix.]

Senator TILLIS. Well, you've already proven to be efficient by yielding back one and a half of your five minutes even after introducing your family members. So, you may have won some right there.

Mr. Lawrence, when I went up to say hello to you, you mentioned that you were going to take me up on my offer to get a little bit more engaged in the electronic health record implementation. I mean, this has transcended Republican and Democrat administrations. Now, for the life of me, I can't get my head around the amount of money that's been spent versus the value that's been derived. I mean, it's barely even implemented. And the initial VISNs, it looks like it's suboptimal and it's certainly not a best practice that the entire VA is benefiting from.

So, tell me, based on your past experience in the VA and any knowledge that you have now, what do you think we—where have we made mistakes, and what do we need to do differently to get this behind us and give the incrementing and care this is going to provide veterans?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Certainly, Senator. Thank you for the question. I mean, I think when Secretary Collins was here last month describing his vision for what had to take place it was very sound. Convening all the players as he described, figuring out the best thinking and what can be done to get be efficiencies to as many veterans as possible as quickly as possible. I echo that.

I think I would probably, foot stomp urgency, that we can't spend months again studying what's going on and figuring out. Now, what I will tell you from my time as Under Secretary, I dealt with technology and multiple things. You heard me talk about the GI Bill Appeals Modernization and Blue Water Navy. All of those had a technology component.

I focused in on three things. One was accountability. I was always surprised how accountability was a challenge. And I think that led to trouble in decision-making. There was a sense of the right contractors, the right roles, the right contracts, as well as additional oversight the VA gets from other contractors to help check and monitor things. So, I would probably start there, but as this—as the Secretary pointed out, everything's on the table to sense—to come up with a plan that can be implemented. And, if confirmed, I will work with him to implement that plan.

Senator TILLIS. Tell me a little bit about what you learned about drawing down the backlog for VA benefits and what may be able to be applied, not only to the health record implementation, but generally, the cleaning out the plumbing and getting things done sooner and better for veterans.

Dr. LAWRENCE. Certainly. Well, when I showed up, the backlog was pretty low, but we drove it down. In fact, in November 2019, just before the pandemic, we were actually worried about running out of work. We were moving so fast through disability claims.

Senator TILLIS. It's a good problem by the way——

Dr. LAWRENCE. Yes, I know.

Senator TILLIS [continuing]. Don't never worry about that.

Dr. LAWRENCE. Part of it was measurement and driving accountability to the people who were processing claims to the levels of management that were processing claims. Along the way, I learned that the technology that supported the claims processing effort needed to be improved. So, I spent a lot of time improving the technology, and quite frankly, I spent a lot of time in—actually, this is something that came from Senator Isakson the first time I met him, which was, you know, stop having VA do things that get in its own way.

So, untangling some of the things that didn't need to be done and really were just there because really increased efficiency. So, it was a lot of things you would remember from your consulting life people, process, and technology. It was all there, but measurement really helped move things along. And when things started to go well, the pride in the employees was really pretty important.

Senator TILLIS. Well, since you yielded back one and a half minutes of your introduction, I'll yield back my time. Senator Blumenthal.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you. I'm happy to take those one and a half minutes.

Dr. Lawrence, this is a critical day, not just for you, but for our veterans. Accountability begins today. Do you commit to responding to the request for information that I have submitted, along with my colleagues, numerous requests for information and accountability within one week of your confirmation, if it occurs?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Senator, as you know, I'm not at the VA—

Senator BLUMENTHAL. That's a yes or no answer. Do you commit to responding?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Senator, I commit to receiving your questions if confirmed. To looking at them, to understanding the information you request. To meeting with you, to understand that information, determine how best to provide you that information.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. I'm going to hope that's a yes answer. I'm going to hope, for our sake, but more important, for our veterans, that you will be responsive and transparent, as so far, this administration has utterly failed to be.

Let me ask you, since January 21st, we've seen everything from a hiring freeze to arbitrary firings of more than 1,000 VA employees, to unelected, unaccountable individuals at the DOGE Musk transition team, accessing IT systems that include veterans' private information, and taking action that is contrary to the interests of our veterans.

The Chairman referred to a transition. Elon Musk seems to regard veterans as roadkill on this so-called transition. And as to the facts here, we're hearing facts directly from veterans, VA employees, and others who have direct evidence of the impacts, the human impacts, of these draconian cuts in funding and staff. Do you support the administration's actions so far?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Thank you very much for the question, Senator. Let me see if I can pull this apart. The information as I understand it the DOGE employee at VA is accessing, is limited to contracts, general operation, and management of the IT system. This person does not have access to veterans' health information, nor veterans' benefits information.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Do you support the firing of 1,000 VA employees?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Senator, as described, I'm not there now, and I do not know how this came about.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. So, you're not willing to answer that question?

Dr. LAWRENCE. What I am willing to talk about, sir, is what I read in the press release. And what I read in the press release about this activity appeared to be a very thoughtful approach to determining who would be laid off in the sense that it was not mission-critical. It was designed not to affect the provision of healthcare and benefits. And there was a safeguard where first level SES supervisors could opt somebody out of that process.

It was further described by the Secretary that the savings generated by these layoffs, \$98 million, would be used to provide better care for our veterans. Consistent with what I spoke.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Well, I just want to submit to you, respectfully, that firing VA employees who provide critical services to veterans is mission-significant, and that the unfairness and illegality of the actions take so far have direct impacts on VA

healthcare, on veterans who are potentially suicidal. If you close the kinds of training sessions and other direct help to veterans who say they're going to take their own lives, that's mission-critical. Wouldn't you agree?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Sir, I can only tell you what I read and what you're describing is inconsistent with what I read. That being said, if confirmed——

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Well, it is inconsistent with what you've read from the VA press releases. I challenge you, as the person who's going to be chief operating officer, to learn exactly what is happening and to be transparent with us.

Let me ask you another question. Transportation for disabled veterans have been reduced. Is that fair?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Senator, thanks for the question. If confirmed, I will look in that to understand how that's happening, why it's happening.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Service lines at VA hospitals and clinics have been halted. Is that fair?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Again, Senator, if confirmed, I will look into that to understand why that's happening. Again, it's inconsistent with what I read about the intent of the layoffs.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. And the kinds of appeals that VA employees are entitled to take now are to offices that are held by the VA Secretary himself. In effect, you're appealing your firing to the person who fired you. Is that fair?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Sir, again, if confirmed, I will look into what are the process by which veterans——

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Well, I hope you look into these questions quickly and equally important that you respond to us as the Secretary has failed to do. Is that fair?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Again, sir, if confirmed, I'll look into this, and yes, I commit to figuring out a way to respond quickly to requests once I'm confirmed.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. My time is expired. I have a lot more questions for you, and I hope that you are more responsive, if you're confirmed, than you have been so far. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator TILLIS. Mr. Lawrence, I'm going to use about a minute and a half of the minute and a half I gave up. Were you advised, or was your opinion sought for any of the personnel actions that have occurred in the last 20 or the last 30 days of the new transition?

Dr. LAWRENCE. No, I'm not employed by VA. I'm not engaged in any decision-making.

Senator TILLIS. Have you in any way been reached, been contacted to advise on strategy, numbers, positions, conditions, anything related to the decisions that have been taken by the administration transition?

Dr. LAWRENCE. No, I have not.

Senator TILLIS. And Mr. Lawrence, you may hear a couple of times today, there is frustration, and I can understand it from the perspective of some of my colleagues on the other side of the aisle. But it wouldn't surprise me as we hear in other hearings if these allegations are true. I don't think that Senator Blumenthal used

those specific words today, but that is Senator speak for—I haven't really confirmed it, but it sounds good—and I think that you're not in a position to make a commitment or to—I don't think that you've been called on as an expert for this transition.

Your position, when you get confirmed, is day one for you at that point. I do believe that you should commit that—any inquiries from the VA, we've been very frustrated in the Biden administration, and the prior Trump administration, and the prior Obama administration—with a lack of response from the VA. That is not unique. And, hopefully, you and the Secretary can change that trend. But I also think that it bears repeating every time that we hear it today, that you're being asked to opine on things you had nothing to do with, and all you have are press reports at this time.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Mr. Chairman, I want to respond since you've characterized my questions. I don't know what Senator speak is, but I know what I said, and I want to tell you, Dr. Lawrence, what I said were the facts. And they sound bad. They don't sound good. But I know what we've heard.

And what's more disturbing to me is, apparently, you haven't asked anything beyond reading these press releases in preparation for your testimony today. Have you asked anyone in the Veterans Administration for the facts?

Dr. LAWRENCE. My interactions centered—thank you for that. So, I can clarify. My interactions with the VA at this point have been around preparation. They have not been around the operation of the VA. I've been given public information about a variety range of subject, but have not been involved in the details about the decisions that led up to the—

Senator BLUMENTHAL. So, your approach to preparation is apparently hear no evil, see no evil, just tell me what you want me to say.

Dr. LAWRENCE. Senator, I think that mischaracterizes my approach to preparation. My approach to preparation is to find all publicly available information that informs me about this position. I'm guided by my experience from three years in the first Trump administration, but I'm not involved in a topical and timely decisions that are taking place in the operation of VA.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. To a lot of veterans, Dr. Lawrence, and I say this with due respect, this is going to sound what you've just said, like bureaucratic gobbledygook, and I hope veterans receive more facts. I hope you give us more facts. We've complained, and it's been bipartisan, that government agencies have failed to be responsive at the VA, and I hope that you do better. Thank you.

Senator TILLIS. Senator Tuberville.

**HON. TOMMY TUBERVILLE,
U.S. SENATOR FROM ALABAMA**

Senator TUBERVILLE. Thank you very much. Thank you Doctor for being here today and willing to take this on. As you can tell, it's pretty volatile. We all care about our veterans. I grew up in a military family, and my dad spent a lot of time in the VA. We've got a lot of good VAs across this country. We in Alabama, we've got a lot of good ones. We've got a lot of bad ones. But it usually comes down to personnel.

And when I first got here, President Trump had evaluated and released 4,000 people from the VA. And the Biden administration rehired them back and with back pay without any evaluation. We have not had any evaluation from those 4,000 since I've been here for four years. People need to be evaluated, and if they can't do the job, or they're negligent, especially in healthcare, they need to be let go. So, I'd hope that we really look into the people running our VAs, and I know you'll do that.

One thing I'm concerned about, and since I've been on this Committee, we have Big Tech that could be very valuable to our VAs. Big Tech has done a great job in a lot of areas; hyperbaric chambers. I've been pushing that for years of trying to get our veterans to be able to use hyperbaric chambers for PTSD, which are not covered in the VA. Their health, their insurance will not cover it. We need to grow up in this business.

There's an ultrasound system that is used now for PTSD that is very, very successful. One in North Carolina, one in San Francisco that I've had friends go to that has saved their life. For the life of me, we cannot get the VA to approve of this system to be used by veterans, even though we don't have them in the VAs.

Would you commit that we would really look hard into these new systems that have come aboard to help our vets? We're losing 18 veterans a day to suicide. It's ridiculous.

Dr. LAWRENCE. Thank you, Senator, for that question. And I enjoyed our visit where you described some of these in detail, and it really is intriguing. And the answer would be yes. And I believe that's consistent with the perspective Secretary Collins shared when he was here a month ago, of looking for organizations that can help our veterans outside VA, whether the nonprofits, for-profits or different approaches, and figuring out how to use them to help our veterans get healthier receive—receive benefits, you know, pursue their American dream.

Senator TUBERVILLE. I would hope we'd get the Big Tech companies really involved in it. You know, I know they're involved in healthcare just for general public, but the VA, we need more and more help. And we obviously spend a lot of money, and I would hope that as we go through this, we'll look at the money that's being spent. The VA's Office of Inspector General recently published a report bringing to light failures within the fiduciary program. 311 veterans had no records within the Veterans Benefit Management System, and \$24 million in benefits were dispersed without oversight to this. I mean speaking of leaking oil, considering your background as Under Secretary for benefits, how will we implement improvements to help this?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Certainly. Thank you, Senator, for that question, and you're right, I do know a lot about the fiduciary program, and one of the things was, of course, who's watching over the people who are taking care of our veterans' money when they're unable to do that.

Oversight continued to be a challenge when I was there. So, if confirmed, I will look into this in more detail and understand what's taking place. Normally, there are processes to do this, and so the kind of things you're describing in the IG report really makes me wonder about the process.

And back to your original point, it makes me wonder about accountability because there are supposed to be leaders in managing those processes and for failures, like the ones you're describing in that report. It's really troubling, and it needs to be tightened down. So, if confirmed, I'll look into that.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Thank you. And one other thing, oversight on the PACT Act. As Senator Tillis said, we're leaking over there, \$3 billion already over. It was jerked out of this hearing room without being finished by the leader of the Senate. It was a Democrat at the time. And it's unfortunate, a lot of things have gone wrong because we didn't have the ability to finish that bill.

So, hopefully, we'll look into that, and we'll get you back here after you take office and see how we can help with that, because the PACT Act could be good if done the right way. So, thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator TILLIS. Senator Hirono.

**HON. MAZIE K. HIRONO,
U.S. SENATOR FROM HAWAII**

Senator HIRONO. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to ask the initial two questions I ask of all nominees before any of my committees. Since you became a legal adult, Dr. Lawrence, have you ever made unwanted request for sexual favors, or committed any verbal or physical harassment, or assault of a sexual nature?

Dr. LAWRENCE. No, I have not.

Senator HIRONO. Have you ever faced discipline or entered into a settlement related to this kind of conduct?

Dr. LAWRENCE. No, I have not.

Senator HIRONO. Dr. Lawrence, I think the PACT Act was one of the bipartisan bills that we worked hard on. And the fact that there was a shortfall in the Act, it says to me that there were a lot of veterans who needed this kind of care, and to talk about \$3 billion shortfall that had not been anticipated. And at the same time, I know that the Republicans are gearing up to provide some \$4 trillion or so in tax cuts to the wealthiest people in our country. Where is the hearing cry relating to that?

You testified also that you didn't know who consisted of 1,000 or so people working at VA who were let go? Is that your testimony?

Dr. LAWRENCE. I testified that I was uninvolved in the process by which those thousand people were laid off.

Senator HIRONO. Would it surprise you to know that these are people who were on probation?

Dr. LAWRENCE. No, Senator. That's exactly what's described in the press release.

Senator HIRONO. People who are on probation—

Dr. LAWRENCE. Yes, ma'am.

Senator HIRONO [continuing]. By category. You also testified that these people are being let go on the basis of their work. It sounds like it's not by entire category. So, here they are. You know, the VA has always had a shortfall of workers to the point where we have had to enact legislation that enables the VA to more quickly hire people because the VA was short on everything from physicians, to nurses, to everybody working at the VA. And that is why

this hiring freeze, we have had to address the particular concerns of VA. And then you have an entire category of people who are being let go. And yet you say that you had no knowledge, no part in doing that when we know for a fact that people on probationary status are being let go throughout the administration, the workers.

So, some 200 people have been let go in SBA. Thousands of people are probably going to be let go in the Department of Justice. These are all people in probation status who were hired, being trained to take jobs that are necessary. And if there's an entity that definitely needs workers, it would be the VA. And I would think that you would be tremendously concerned about what's going on in the loss of 1,000 people.

We talk about the importance of transparency. Since his confirmation, Secretary Collins has also been named the temporary head of the Office of Government Ethics and the Office of Special Counsel. I don't know what temporary means. It could be a year, it could be forever. Who knows.

How do his additional roles impact the delegation of responsibilities between the two of you, even if temporary. Don't you have some responsibilities relating to whistleblowers within the VA? Wouldn't you have some overlap between what Secretary Collins now is responsible for and what you will be responsible for?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Yes, ma'am, thank you for that question. If confirmed, the Deputy Secretary is the chief operating officer responsible for a lot of the administrative functions within the department to include Office of Accountability and Whistleblower. Secretary Collins and I have had no conversation about his new duties. And so, you know, if confirmed, I'll discuss those with him.

Senator HIRONO. There is no question that throughout the administration that the decisions that have been made, and that had to be revised or explained is rampant. And so, this goes to, in my view, the chaos, confusion that it is in every—in every agency.

Let me get to a concern that a lot of veterans have about what happens in VA. There has been on ongoing concerns about privatizing at VA and the Veterans Project, the portion of *Project 2025*, which you are acknowledged as having had a great part in writing, recommends outsourcing of various roles at VA to contractors. Is that something that you are going to push for, that you're going to begin to privatize VA responsibilities?

Dr. LAWRENCE. So, thank you for the question, ma'am. Just to clarify, I was a small contributor to the section on VA where I wrote about efficiencies and the benefits process. The Secretary was very clear, and I echo his comments. We are not going to privatize the VA. We would push back on any efforts to do that. We understand, I think the Secretary said this well, that there's a need for both the VA and also access to community.

Senator HIRONO. Mr. Chairman, there have been ongoing efforts to privatize segments of the VA, and I certainly am going to hold you to your commitment that you do not have an intention of privatizing activities at the VA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator TILLIS. Thank you, Senator Hirono. Senator Sheehy.

**HON. TIM SHEEHY,
U.S. SENATOR FROM MONTANA**

Senator SHEEHY. Good morning, Paul, thanks for undertaking this important duty, yet again, in your life. Is the VA working right now?

Dr. LAWRENCE. As you know, Senator, I'm not there now. I'm not involved in the decision about what's going on, so it is really hard for me to talk about something I'm not there. From afar, I would say veterans continue to get healthcare and benefits, veterans continue to be able to interact with the VA. When I go to the building, it works. People are there doing things. So, from afar, I would say, broadly, yes.

Senator SHEEHY. You know, I think we're at \$50 billion now, is the estimated software upgrade costs for the healthcare system software that's been—you know, we've been talking about this for almost a decade. The rough estimate for cost for the VA is it cost the VA about three times as much money to deliver \$1 of care to a patient as it does the private sector or the DoD healthcare system. How do we reform the VA healthcare system so it is, for example, as efficient as the DoD healthcare system can be?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Thank you, Senator, for those questions. And I think when Secretary Collins was here, he talked about this a lot, trying to figure out how we support our veterans as efficiently as possible.

If confirmed, I think we need to take a hard look at why things are more expensive relative to other comparable organizations. I mean, when I talk about providing veterans world-class service, part of that is comparing how well VA does to other organizations that do similar things and understanding what the difference could be. Perhaps it's because the patient population is different, they're older, but perhaps it's in the way it operates. So, if confirmed, I would welcome the chance to sort of dig into this and share observations and insights with you.

Senator SHEEHY. And when we look at the transition, I think for many veterans on this panel and many veterans, period, one of the most frustrating parts of the VA journey is that handoff from active duty to VA. And even parts of the VA that do function well, and they are there, making sure that that bridge between active duty and VA is seamless continues to evade our ability to accomplish it effectively.

So, what can you do as the number two guy at VA to make sure that as veterans transition from active duty to the VA, they don't get lost in the shuffle. They don't make the leap from one end to the other and are lost at sea. How do we help fix that problem?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Well, thank you for that question. And don't forget, sir, I transitioned, too, so I know exactly the experience you're talking about. As the Deputy Secretary, I'll be the co-chair of the JEC, the Joint Executive Committee, that was already mentioned, where we work with DoD to discuss these issues.

I think the Secretary, when you asked him a similar question, is he talked about the importance of getting the transition right. I echo that. I think it's very important that seamless information transfer to DoD to VA. I cannot tell you the number of times in past lives veterans complain, "How many more times are you going

to ask me for my DD214 when you have it already.” It’s things like that that really set things in a bad place.

In addition, I feel strongly about connectivity. Making sure veterans have a job when they transition, make sure they have a great place to live. As you know, states are actively competing for our veterans, and we should be helping them do that. So, I think through the JEC, I’ll really be able to align with Secretary Collins and make sure we’re working on the right things.

Senator SHEEHY. VA employee accountability is important. We see patient satisfaction scores that if the VA was a business, they’d have a one star on Yelp. And when the patients are frustrated, they’re—I’ve been in office now for what, seven weeks as a Senator, and a lot of my time is spent dealing with VA issues. When veterans reach out to United States Senate office saying, I can’t get a response from the VA, I can’t get my claim processed, I can’t get an appointment scheduled.

The fact that we’ve been able to help solve those issues is great, but it’s extremely frustrating that the best place a veteran can go to actually get their problems fixed is not the VA, it’s going to the congressional delegation writing letters, showing up in person saying, “Can someone please help me get a response?”

And although many of the reforms we’re seeing be undertaken now are coming under tremendous criticism, it’s about time we change something at the VA because a lot of it is not working. I think you have a great vision to help fix that, but how do we make the VA a customer service organization so when our veterans need something common sense, they can actually call the VA and not their Senator or their Congressman and get something done?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Thank you for that question, Senator. This came up in numerous meetings with your colleagues on this Committee when I met with them of the frustration of having to do the casework you’re describing. Part of it is, of course, the effort to learn as to why these problems are happening and to resolve them. I found my previous tenure many, many really good employees, and we should recognize that at the VA.

At the same time, however, one of the ways we have great customer service is we exit folks who are not serving our veterans really well, and we would use accountability to do that. So, the measurement, the understanding of the problems, the solutions, and understanding where the failures took place and how we deal with them.

Senator SHEEHY. Great. Well, thanks again for your service. Thanks for taking this yet again.

Senator TILLIS. Senator Hassan.

**HON. MARGARET WOOD HASSAN,
U.S. SENATOR FROM NEW HAMPSHIRE**

Senator HASSAN. Well, thank you, Senator Tillis, and Senator Blumenthal for this hearing. And, Dr. Lawrence, again, congratulations on your nomination, and thank you and your entire family for your service to our country.

Before I begin my questions, I want to take a moment or two to express my concern about recent steps that the Trump administra-

tion has taken that have caused disruption and confusion throughout much of our country, especially within the VA.

Last month, the President instituted a federal hiring freeze, which at first included the VA before the administration tried to backtrack. The Trump administration also attempted to institute a federal funding freeze. The VA later claimed that its programs weren't impacted, though veterans were rightfully concerned about the impacts on the services that they need. And just last week we learned that the Trump administration dismissed over a thousand VA employees, people who help veterans get the care and benefits that they've earned and deserve at a time when the VA should be expanding its workforce, not cutting it down.

Taken together, it is obvious to me that this administration is making drastic decisions without facts, to Senator Tillis's point. If you're going to start right sizing an organization, you gather facts and you do it in a transparent way. And instead, what we're seeing from Mr. Musk and Mr. Trump is they're just making stuff up, telling the public things that then later turn out not to be true, and they're not thinking through how their actions will actually affect veterans.

I'm concerned that this reckless pattern of decision-making will continue. So, it's incredibly important that we have leadership at the VA who will push back on decisions that could negatively impact healthcare and benefits for our veterans. So, Dr. Lawrence, I want to start with a question. It's a question I'm asking all nominees, in light of recent events. If directed by the President of the United States to take action that would break the law, would you follow the law or follow the President's directive?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Thank you very much for that question, Senator. I would follow the law. And I would just also point out that in my previous tenure, no such situations came up. We were very much focused on veterans. We never had conversations like this.

Senator HASSAN. I understand that. But the last four weeks have shown us some new information and new behavior. And so, that's why I asked the question. If a court issues an order requiring the VA to take or refrain from taking specific actions, will you follow the court's order?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Thank you for the question. Yes, Senator.

Senator HASSAN. Thank you. Now, I want to turn to a different topic. As the Trump administration continues to indiscriminately cut the federal workforce, how will you ensure that veterans receive the healthcare and benefits that they've earned and deserved without disruption?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Thank you very much for that question Senator. And just to clarify, the Secretary talked about, you know, really providing veterans excellent service and caring for the veterans. And I think the layoffs last Friday sort of indicate the thinking behind it, right? These were described as non-mission critical folks who would not affect the provision of healthcare and benefits.

Senator HASSAN. Let me just interrupt you there, because we've heard this from other agencies, too. Right now, the Trump administration's trying to rehire people who oversee our nuclear stockpile because they didn't realize that those were some of the people they fired. They're trying to rehire people who are responsible for con-

taining bird flu as the price of eggs is skyrocketing, but they didn't realize they fired them. So, you will understand why I don't take the administration's reassurance about who these employees are at the VA with great confidence.

Dr. LAWRENCE. I understand your perspective, and I'm unaware of the details of those situations. So, forgive me for that. But I would point out in this situation, though, the VA had a safeguard, which was an SES supervisor could opt the person out of the layoff. So, there was an element of detailed knowledge of what the individual did and their importance in the organization.

Senator HASSAN. So, you are telling me that you would try to make sure that that kind of system is in place. So, before somebody is actually laid off, before they are walked out the door, there is an assessment on the ground at the facility or entity about whether that person's job is mission-critical to our veterans?

Dr. LAWRENCE. What you describe is one variation of that, but some level as the person closest to their work, understanding their value in providing healthcare, and benefits, and other service to our veterans to make sure that it's consistent with the indication that these are not mission-critical layoffs.

Senator HASSAN. Well, I will hold you to that commitment. Last week, the VA dismissed more than 1,000 employees. These dismissals, combined with other steps the Trump administration has taken, have created a climate of fear and uncertainty for federal employees.

I'm concerned that these actions will prompt some VA employees to eventually leave federal service, and will additionally scare many more potential employees from applying for VA jobs in the future. If that happens, the VA's going to have an even harder time hiring the appropriate number of nurses, doctors, and others to provide the care and benefits our veterans have earned. If confirmed, what will you do to help rebuild trust with VA employees and help recruit the new employees that VA will need moving forward?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Thank you for the question. If confirmed, one of the many things I'll do is focus on the importance of the mission and the very special nature by which we do and what we do. And in terms of the healthcare providers, in terms of not only a great environment, but also the access to resources and research and the like.

However, what I would also point out, ma'am, is that in my previous tenure, when we exited non-performing employees, the top performers really liked that. Because they understood as managers, we could differentiate between their very valuable contribution and the poor performers, and they understood the difference.

Senator HASSAN. Sure, that's true in every organization. But there isn't any evidence right now that the approach by this administration is going after poor performers. They are using a meat cleaver when they should be using a scalpel. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Senator TILLIS. Thank you, Senator Hassan. Before I go to Senator Boozman, I did want to note—I have two things. One, I'm trying to get the annual attrition rate for probationary employees over the last four years because there is attrition within these ranks as they're being onboarded. But I also can point out, because it was

a discussion about every position in the VA is critical, that the Biden administration intended to cut VHA workforce by 10,000 employees deemed not in critical positions. And their strategy to do this was slowing hiring and allowing increased attrition. Senator Boozman.

**HON. JOHN BOOZMAN,
U.S. SENATOR FROM ARKANSAS**

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thank you for being here, Dr. Lawrence. We had a good visit not too long ago that I really enjoyed, and I also appreciate the fact that that you're a proven commodity. You did a great job as Under Secretary for benefits in the past, and we look forward to using your expertise as we go forward.

During Secretary Collins hearing before us last month, I raised the issue of the VA's State Veterans Home located in Fayetteville, Arkansas. This facility is an excellent resource for veterans in Arkansas, but it's in dire need of upgrades. Unfortunately, the facility will not receive necessary fiscal year 2024 funding. Secretary Collins committed to continue to work with me on the issue. Do we have your commitments as you'll also continue to work with us in regard to the Northwest Arkansas facility?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Yes, Senator, thank you for the question. If confirmed, I'll work with the Secretary to better understand his commitment, and we'll work with you to figure out what makes sense.

Senator BOOZMAN. Good. Thank you very much. The VA has approved for GI Bill purposes, a unique vocational transition school in my state, exclusively for veterans, which emulates the way they learn during military service.

Notwithstanding, the GI Bill approval and working model based on military training, previous administration policy bars non-accredited education institutions access to transition assistance program sites. I believe the strategy of exclusion limits the potential of these institutions because it blocks them from connecting with the soon-to-be veterans at the most significant period of separation.

If confirmed, will you work with the VA/DoD Joint Executive Committee that oversees the TAP Executive Committee, will you commit to working with me on this issue?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Thank you for the question, Senator. Yes, if confirmed, I'll look into this. Whether it's through the JEC or whether it's just one off to better understand the situation and figure out—I mean, I care greatly about veteran employment. Obviously, if this is a good training program and enables that, we should figure out what to make sense and if these are unintended consequences of rules, we should look into that. So, yes.

Senator BOOZMAN. Very good. Thank you. As you're aware, the VA faced significant questions around its budget last year, with many issues that have yet to be answered. Do you still believe the VA's fiscal year 2026 advance appropriation request to be accurate or will greater funding be required? Much of the issues we experienced last year came due to the breakdown in communication between the VA and Congress. How do you plan to revamp VA's congressional affairs to improve communication and prevent future breakdowns?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Thank you, Senator, for those, both questions. Let me break them apart. In terms of the budget, at this point, my knowledge is not that detailed. So, if confirmed, I will dig into this and have a more precise response, and I'll work with the chief financial officer to really understand and provide information.

In terms of your second question about communication, in almost every one of my visits to your colleagues, this came up, and I believe Secretary Collins addressed it in his confirmation hearing as well, where he talked about the need to not only receive information to do constituent services, but to get ahead of that and to talk to your teams, just get a sense of what's going on in advance.

So, yes, it was pretty clear about the desire for more information from VA, and quite frankly, a two-way street, not only to assist you with constituent service, but to better understand what you're hearing so we can get ahead of the problem so they don't turn into issues. So, yes.

Senator BOOZMAN. Very good. In our previous conversations, we discussed the importance of addressing veteran suicide. We agreed that the VA must do things differently as the status quo is simply not acceptable. Last Congress I co-lead the Not Just a Number Act, which requires VA to examine and identify key data about veteran suicides and analyze which factors have the greatest impact on preventing suicide. How can the VA use the information collected as a result of this legislation to prevent veteran suicide, and how should the VA's suicide prevention efforts evolve?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Certainly, Senator, thank you for that question. I agree with your sentiment, which is for a long time we've been talking about this. A great deal of energy and a great deal of efforts been spent on this, and it seems like the number doesn't change. So, I think the sentiment about can we do things differently? What can we learn? What can we learn from data? If confirmed, I will look into this and try to figure out if there isn't a new path, if there aren't other successes somewhere that we could bring to bear on this really tragic issue.

Senator BOOZMAN. Very good. Thank you.

Senator TILLIS. Senator Gallego.

**HON. RUBEN GALLEGO,
U.S. SENATOR FROM ARIZONA**

Senator GALLEGO. Thank you, Mr. Chair. One of my things I'm very proud of is passing the PACT Act. Those people don't know the PACT Act, it was burn pit legislation that in fact, in many of us Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. I, myself slept next to a burn pit for one month and hit Iraq. And, unfortunately, have seen some of the marines that I served with die from diseases related to the burn pit.

So, the burn legislation was a big win for veterans, first of all. And it's bipartisan in nature. And it is really one of the largest expansions of care and eligibility in VA history, considering it was a 20-year war and considering how many men and women were exposed to burn pits and other very dangerous chemicals. So, it's a very important step forward to really right the years of wrongs.

And when I say wrongs, a lot of my friends, some of them died before they got even closer getting claimed. Some of them actually

ended up having to pay out of pocket because the VA didn't recognize their sickness as related to their service. And many of them still don't even know that they have access to these benefits.

So, with everything that's happening right now, I am concerned that while we are constricting and reducing who we're hiring, we at the same time want more people to apply for the PACT Act benefits, and want to hear what are your plans about how to increase awareness for the PACT Act so we know that a lot of these men and women can start getting benefits now? Because if not, they will get benefits, as you know and you've served in this role before years later, but we'll end up having to back pay their service plus interest.

Dr. LAWRENCE. Thank you very much for that question, Senator. I agree that more communication needs to be put out there for veterans about what their benefits and healthcare could be under this. I think that we tend to think about communication as, well, let's just put something on the internet. What I learned from my previous experience before was that low tech communication is invaluable. Town halls are invaluable to go and explain this. So, I would expect to do more in-person communication.

I know the Secretary talked about that, but he'll be very busy on lots of important issues. So, I assume as the Deputy Secretary, a lot of this will fall on me. I'm a big believer in communication. We probably can't over communicate on this, but I think it's very important we tell veterans, you must come now to the VA even if you think you are fine because years from now, something will happen and you'll wish you came when we better understood it. So, yes, I completely agree.

Senator GALLEGOS. And kind of in the vein of over communication. One of the things that concerns me about the President's EOs against DEI, and in some regards, yes, DEI did go too far. But one of the things that it may impact is culturally competent communication.

What does that mean? So, Arizona, we have 22 federally recognized tribes. We have an over-representation all over the country. There are more tribal members that serve in the military than the ratio of their population. And as well as we have, for example, growing female veteran population that sometimes wants to seek services specifically from women or women that have been in their experience. And these types of EOs sometimes are not going to allow best practices and best methods of communications.

What's the balance you're going to be able to strike on that? Or are you going to be stuck to the EO because, for example, some female service members that have survived rape, and by other service members, want to only speak to women and will only feel comfortable speaking to women. Some of the EOs are going to go so far that they may not even have the specialized programs for survivors of rape.

Dr. LAWRENCE. Yes, thank you for that question, Senator. What I learned from my previous tenure was the value of listening to and talking to veterans, and if not veterans directly, the organizations that represent them. I found those invaluable in terms of communicating things for us.

So, I would hope that, if confirmed as Deputy Secretary, I'll work with the Veteran Experience Office to really understand how we access the individual groups you're talking about and engage them effectively.

Senator GALLEG0. And part of the problem is that this EO may not even allow you to. Will you try to find a waiver to this, or speak to the President's cabinet, whoever it is to get that? Because for example, there are great groups that are better at outreach for Latinos. There's some Latino veterans organizations. For African Americans, there's African American veterans organizations that could be very good at reaching out to these groups that sometimes don't necessarily listen to other lines of communication. But I'm not sure that the executive order will actually allow that to happen.

Dr. LAWRENCE. Certainly. I appreciate the question and understand your perspective. If confirmed, I'll look in to see whether that is actually accurate. That if we can engage them. I completely agree, these groups are invaluable in terms of communicating with veterans and understanding. I mean, it was through groups who represented older veterans that I learned telephone communication was so valuable. So, absolutely, they're great sources of information about how we engage our veterans.

Senator GALLEG0. Thank you. I yield back.

Senator TILLIS. Senator King.

**HON. ANGUS S. KING, JR.,
U.S. SENATOR FROM MAINE**

Senator KING. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Congratulations on your elevation. First, I want to agree with Senator Sheehy. Transition, I think is one of the most important areas that we can work on. I've always felt that the Defense Department should put as much money and effort into the transition out as they do to the recruiting in.

One of the initiatives of the first Trump administration was a pre-registration of active-duty veterans in the Veterans Administration. So, that was one step they didn't have to take. I think that's a good idea. I've got a bill to essentially continue and expand that. Is that something you could help us move forward with?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Thank you, Senator, for the question. I think that's a very good idea. And whether as Deputy Secretary, I would work with JEC, yes, I think that's something I could support.

Senator KING. Thank you. On the layoffs, here's the problem. You've testified, and the press release has been this was done in a thoughtful way with reviews and all those. I'm a great advocate of Ronald Reagan's admonition, "Trust, but verify." I'd like to see some data about that that verifies that in fact, that took place. It's hard for me to believe that 1,000 people were laid off in a matter of weeks with that kind of thoughtful process that you're defining.

I should also mention that given average attrition rates in the Federal Government approximately 2,000 people have left the VA, if the rates at the VA are the same as the rest of the government. So, we're really not talking about 1,000 empty positions. We're talking about 3,000 just in the last month. 2,000 a month is about the rate that would apply to the VA. So, we're talking about a diminution in the number of people.

And I know that some effort has been made to not, for example, apply the hiring freeze to medical personnel, direct providers. But I would argue that if nobody's there to answer the phone when a veteran calls for an appointment, and I think Senator Sheehy mentioned this, the difficulty of getting appointments, that's a denial of benefits.

So, it worries me that we're not really focusing on what exactly the role of those people are, and that the steps so far seem likely to diminish the availability of services to veterans. Your thoughts?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Thank you for the question, Senator. I agree, and thanks for the visit where you shared your experience with Governor and how you went about doing something similar. So, thank you. That was very important perspective. I think——

Senator KING. Did it in eight months instead of four weeks. That was one difference.

Dr. LAWRENCE. Yes. No, I took away that. Back to your question, I think that, if confirmed, I would also like to look at the data and see that it did in fact follow what I saw in the press release. And I think the Secretary committed to being very transparent about this. I don't want to speak for him, but I would talk to him about following through on that and sharing the information as well so folks have a sense of trust in what took place.

I also would go back to, as we talked about yesterday, the safeguard in place, which the person answering the phone, an SES supervisor should be able to say, yes, they are critical, they should be opted out of this layoff. So, hopefully, that's where that took place.

Senator KING. By the way, I was agreeing with Senator Sheehy. I disagree with him on one thing, and that is electronic medical records. The original sin of the electronic medical records fiasco was a no bid contract in the last Trump administration of a brand-new system instead of going to the marketplace and seeing what was available in terms of proven existing systems that are operating all across the country.

The other piece that worries me is that everybody in the VA, except apparently direct service providers, got the famous early retirement letter that, you know, if you quit by September 30th, you'll get paid. Nobody can convince me that was thoughtful.

In other words, that went to everybody. What if the best people leave, which is what a lot of people I've talked to said is going to happen. The people who can get good jobs immediately. The good people are going to leave. That there's no way to define that letter that everybody in the Federal Government got, including shipyard workers at Portsmouth Naval Shipyard, the CIA, the Defense Department, and the VA.

How do you defend that as a thoughtful process for redefining the federal workforce?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Thank you for that question. And I'm sorry to disappoint you, I wasn't there. I do not know the process under which it—you know, if confirmed, I'll look into it to better understand. But I have nothing to add.

Senator KING. I understand that, and I understand that you weren't there, but you're the nearest thing we have to somebody to question on these issues today. So, your bad luck to be here.

A couple of provisions from *Project 2025*, which I understand you had a limited contribution to, but I'm sure you're aware of. One of them is a suggestion for the VA increase automation. The best way to provide benefits faster and more accurately is by using technology to perform most of the work. We're already learning in the private sector insurance companies that giving AI the decision about making these kinds of decisions doesn't work very well. Do you think increased use of technology and artificial intelligence in claims processing is a good idea?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Thank you for that question, Senator. If you notice, it said, "most of the work." The way a claim comes about is there's a lot of work where you gather information. It's what's called development. That's what takes so long, is getting all the veteran information. To get it in front of somebody to make a decision. Technology can be used to gather that information faster so a government employee and a claims adjudicator can make the decision.

Senator KING. So, you're testifying that you're not talking about AI making the decision, we're talking about simply automating the collection of data.

Dr. LAWRENCE. It's what's called development. That's correct, Senator. I think that the decision should be made by an individual, a VA employee, as required by law, I believe, but also to bring judgment into things. I think technology is great, but it's not the end-all and be-all.

Senator KING. Continuing—I guess I'm over my time. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator TILLIS. Mr. Lawrence, just a clarification, it was a Cerner platform that was ultimately decided for the electronic health record. Is that correct?

Dr. LAWRENCE. That's correct.

Senator TILLIS. And is it a Cerner platform that's also the baseline for the DoD system?

Dr. LAWRENCE. That's correct.

Senator TILLIS. Was it part of the logic behind that to hopefully not modify it so much that they couldn't better integrate so that we're carrying data from DoD to the VA?

Dr. LAWRENCE. I just arrived when all that went down, so I'm not—I'm going to tell you sort of observations, but yes, the idea was—

Senator TILLIS. Senator King, I think, asked a good question. But having been involved in that process and trying to minimize the customization of two systems, well they should be in that office that integrates. And why I'm so glad to hear that you're going to step up your focus on it. If somebody went wrong, taking two baseline systems that are precisely the same applications and made them less compatible, there's a lot of quality time that I would suggest to the Chair and Ranking Member considered before this Committee. Senator Blackburn.

**HON. MARSHA BLACKBURN,
U.S. SENATOR FROM TENNESSEE**

Senator BLACKBURN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And indeed, we have the Center for Medical Interoperability in Nashville, and

these are precisely the kind of issues that they work on. And, of course, what we have learned with healthcare innovation is that payment processing can be standardized and efficiencies achieved in payment processing, and also, as you said, in finding that definable data that is necessary for that claim. And we should use every piece of technology that we can to speed the claims to our veterans.

Mr. Lawrence, first of all, congratulations and thank you. And thank you for the time to visit. I want to go first with you to the backlog on claims because you got the number down the lowest that it has ever been. And you mentioned that in your opening remarks. And what we see now is an enormous claims backlog. If you look at the claims that are under 120 days, and also over 120 days, it is 954,000 claims.

So, what I would like to hear from you is what steps you're going to take first and foremost to get those claims, those numbers down.

Dr. LAWRENCE. Certainly. Thank you for the question, and I enjoyed our visit very much. I guess what I'll begin with is going back, if confirmed, and talking to the folks over there and reviewing what's taking place. Because part of how we got it down to such a low number is through a series of process activities and technology activities. And I would want—

Senator BLACKBURN. What was that number?

Dr. LAWRENCE. It was less than it was, 64,751.

Senator BLACKBURN. Okay, 64,751. Let me ask you also, and we talked about this privately. 80 percent of the VA employees are unionized, and they are some of the ones we have heard that have fought going to EHRs, and they have fought returning to work full-time.

So, in order to address this backlog issue, how are you going to deal with these unionized employees and get them back in the office so that they are processing those claims and have them adapt using the EHR system that is there, that now you've got Oracle handling that contract.

Dr. LAWRENCE. Certainly. I think the Secretary, when he was here, talked about this very directly, which is, we have to explain that the mission of the VA is to serve veterans. And that is our focus and that is what we need to do. And anything that distracts from that has to take second place to that.

So, if that means getting back to work, so be it. If that means coming to the office, so be it. We have to understand that these distractions take away from our ability to deliver care and benefits to our veterans, and we need to minimize those and refocus activity on what the mission is.

Senator BLACKBURN. Now, last week, Secretary Collins let us know that the community care network contracts are going to face delays because of some obstacles that were put in place during the Biden administration. We've got a lot of veterans in Tennessee that prefer community care. We've got 95 counties, 90 are rural counties, and they prefer community care.

So, I would like to know that you all are going to continue to push to get these contracts back on track for the community care network, and I don't want our veterans to see a disruption or to be displaced. So, do we have your commitment in that regard?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Yes. If confirmed, I'll work with the Secretary to follow through on his commitment to you and help him in any way.

Senator BLACKBURN. And then, the first hearing we did here in the VA Committee was on community care and simplifying this. Getting a pilot project in place so that the veteran is making the decision on their care and not having to wait on the VA and a case-worker there who's working remote, working 5 days out of 10, or 2 days out of 10 in-person to make a decision to allow them to have the care they need in the location that they need.

And I would like your commitment on providing the veteran with that decision-making authority instead of having that land with the bureaucracy in the VA.

Dr. LAWRENCE. Thank you very much, Senator. If confirmed, I'll work with the Secretary on this. I know that he spoke about the importance of choice in his conversations, and so I want to make sure I'm aligned with that. But I think we are. So, yes, we'll work on this together.

Senator BLACKBURN. Thank you so much. I yield back.

Senator TILLIS. Senator Duckworth.

**HON. TAMMY DUCKWORTH,
U.S. SENATOR FROM ILLINOIS**

Senator DUCKWORTH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Dr. Lawrence, it's good to see you. Thank you for meeting with me last week. I think we had a very productive discussion.

I want to go back to the President's illegal and unconstitutional executive order to fire people across government. And his allowing unelected billionaire Elon Musk as DOGE to have the illegal privilege to carry out these mass firings. You mentioned that the way it's supposed to work at VA is that there's probably an SES who should review all of these and to make sure that people are not being fired from critical positions.

I will tell you that last week, the VA did fire people from the Veterans Crisis Hotline, the 24/7 hotline where veterans who are thinking of harming themselves who are in crisis can call. And my office has personally spoken to some of those folks who were laid off. So, let's pause for a moment to think about this. The veterans crisis line is where veterans turn when they're considering suicide or self-harm. The public servants answering the phones are doing some of the toughest work imaginable to support people who serve their country in their absolute darkest hour.

Now, after I raised these cases to the VA and spoke out about them, it sounds like thankfully the VA is attempting to rehire some of these employees this morning. But we shouldn't even be in this position. Will you commit to reviewing what the process the VA engaged in and firing those 1,000 employees last week, and any future firings to make sure that this process that you talked about, supposedly being the ideal process, is actually happening as opposed to what has already happened?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Yes, Senator, if confirmed, I will review, especially with the crisis hotline, how that came about and what it should inform us if or when future layoffs are done.

Senator DUCKWORTH. Thank you. I'll also tell you, I have read the letters that they received, the emails that they received, and

it contained no information about any of their benefits, their leave days their healthcare benefits. Some of these employees were pregnant who would lose their healthcare.

And so, I'm deeply concerned that the letters were so indiscriminate and also did not provide people with information on what their next steps are, and they were immediately locked out of their employment systems. I think that we owe the veteran community transparent answers and accountability without excuses or finger pointing.

After this news broke, my office immediately, almost immediately, began receiving phone calls from veterans, not just from Illinois, but also across the country, who have been in federal service across different agencies for years. So, these are long-term federal employees, not probationary. They've been in long-term employees for years, and they raised my concern that veterans who use their veterans' preference in their hiring for their positions are coded by OPM as probationary. And they have been wrongfully caught up in this egregious mass firing sweep.

When veterans use veterans preference in the hiring process, OPM codes may code them as probationary, even if they're long-term federal employees. And so, individuals can also be coded as probationary if they have recently been promoted. So, they're still in the same agency, but they were just promoted to a new position, but they're coded as probationary.

These veterans with years of federal service should not have been fired. Some of the people from the crisis hotline that I spoke with, that we spoke to, had 18 years of federal service, 5 years of federal service, they should not have been fired.

Dr. Lawrence, I know that I do not need to remind you that veterans make up 30 percent of the federal workforce. They're the most patriotic people in our Nation. They served in uniform and many turn around and choose to continue to serve in Federal Government, especially at VA.

We talked about the VA's mission. It's on the wall. It's for the clearest mission of any federal agency. Yet the Trump administration, filled with some of the most disloyal oligarchs of our time, who egregiously invoke the theme of patriotism to camouflage their anti-democratic agenda, has disrespected these veterans dedicated and enduring service to our Nation.

If confirmed, will you both publicly and privately call on President Trump and Elon Musk to immediately investigate this catastrophic oversight error in terms of firing veterans who are coded as probationary, even though they're long-term government employees, and rehire these employees who are so wrongfully and disrespectfully fired? And will you push the Trump administration to exercise transparency and accountability for federal employees?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Thank you for that. Thank you for that question, Senator, and for clarifying the OPM process. If confirmed, I will look into that process to better understand how it affects veterans, and based on what I determine, happy to share with you and the Secretary, then figure out a course of action going forward to correct it.

Senator DUCKWORTH. Thank you. Would you carry out an illegal or unconstitutional order under the direction of President Trump or Elon Musk?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Thank you for the question. No, Senator.

Senator DUCKWORTH. Thank you. I yield back.

Senator TILLIS. Senator Murray.

**HON. PATTY MURRAY,
U.S. SENATOR FROM WASHINGTON**

Senator MURRAY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for being here today. I'm going to go back to a topic I know you've covered a bit, and that's that the EHR started in 2018 under President Trump, and in 2020, it deployed two Washington State VA hospitals. Instead of helping to improve our veterans' healthcare, that rollout ended up being a complete disaster and it endangered veteran patients.

Unfortunately, the system still is not working the way that the VA, and doctors, and nurses need and veterans are continuing to suffer. Last month, the VA announced it would be moving forward with pre-deployment activities at the next four sites for this electronic healthcare record. You will oversee the EHR program.

So, if confirmed, I want to know what you're going to do differently to hold Oracle accountable, and to make sure we get this system right for our veterans.

Dr. LAWRENCE. Thank you, Senator, for the question. And thank you for the visit. I was greatly informed by your description of what took place in 2018. So, let's start there.

If confirmed, I would really like to better understand what happened, that what you described resulted. Why we did not listen to the employees. Why that was not structured in there. In a good implementation of a system, listening to employees in training and getting feedback, and going through changes are all supposed to happen. So, I would like to know why that didn't happen and what happened as a result of that. Hopefully, learning has taken place, but I'd like to validate that.

If confirmed, as you heard Secretary Collins describe, he wants to convene a team of everybody involved to figure out what the best path going forward. If confirmed, I want to work on that and figure out what the plan should be in terms of holding everybody accountable for what's supposed to take place, right? To get the most benefits as quickly as possible to our veterans within the amount of money we have.

Senator MURRAY. Well, let me make this very clear. We have heard that answer from every VA person that's come before this Committee for a number of years now. Everybody's looked at it, everybody's considered it, everybody's talked about it, everybody's convened new panels. It is not working.

So, I need your commitment that it's not just convene people and take a look at it, but you're going to make changes to it, and demand changes, and get those fixed because we have spent literally millions and millions of dollars. And worse, veterans are still in jeopardy in their care, and doctors, and nurses, and VA facilities are really frustrated.

I asked you a really important question. What are you going to do differently? The answer you gave me, I understand where you're coming from, but it is the same one I've heard over and over.

Dr. LAWRENCE. Certainly. Well, thank you, Senator, and I'm glad you brought that up. So, let me share two observations which I didn't put in that. One is, I think that the Secretary conveyed a strong sense of urgency that it should be done much sooner than later. And the second thing I would point out is in my previous tenure at VA as Under Secretary, I dealt with technology problems with the GI Bill, with Appeals Modernization, and with Blue Water Navy. I implemented technology.

I suspect the difference, though I don't have the inventory of everybody who sat in front of you, the difference is I've actually done this. And so that's the difference I will bring to this. And I understand the frustration, and I pledge to work as best, as hard as I can to get this done.

Senator MURRAY. Well, I don't want to be sitting here again two years from now, same conversation, new person. Last week, my offices phones were ringing off the hook because I assume a lot of peoples were with really panicked calls from researchers at the VA. They had been laid off with zero justification, zero warning. And in fact, up until then, the VA had actually assured them that they were protected from Trump and Musk's mass firings.

VA research shouldn't be political and firing VA researchers who are in the middle of a process to find lifesaving treatment for veterans with conditions like PTSD, or opioid addiction, or cancer from toxic exposure is really cruel and wasteful. Some veterans are literally in the middle of receiving breakthrough treatment through these clinical trials. What will happen to them and their care when their lead researcher was just fired?

Dr. Lawrence, I want to ask you a couple specific questions. Were you aware of the Trump administration to fire these VA researchers?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Thank you for the question. No, I'm not engaged in anything at the department now.

Senator MURRAY. Do you support it?

Dr. LAWRENCE. If confirmed, I will look into this to better understand what took place. I don't have enough information to comment on that.

Senator MURRAY. Oh, so you won't commit to restoring these VA researchers' positions so they can continue that research on PTSD, and opioid addiction, and cancer that was caused by their exposure to toxic chemicals?

Dr. LAWRENCE. If confirmed, I commit to looking into to understand what happened and why.

Senator MURRAY. Well, I hope that's not like every other answer we get from people that we are hearing from; that they'll look into it and no action is taken. You've just promised to look into it. This is critical.

Dr. LAWRENCE. I understand.

Senator MURRAY. Thank you.

Senator TILLIS. I had the staff look into this, and we will include it in the record.

Senator TILLIS. That somewhere a little bit under 5 percent of probationary employees do not continue employment. We have about 40,000 to 50,000 new VA employees a year. So, that'd be roughly 2,000. We are trying to really normalize and see how much of this is a net impact as a result of the President's EO, but right now, it sounds like it's tracking unless we see significant attrition in the later part of the year. Senator Banks.

**HON. JIM BANKS,
U.S. SENATOR FROM INDIANA**

Senator BANKS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Dr. Lawrence, I enjoyed working with you in the first Trump term, and look forward to working with you again in a bigger way to serve our Nation's veterans.

The Indianapolis Medical Center is overdue for a total replacement. The VA's five-year development plan calls for \$206 million next year to plan and design the project. And I just want to ask you, will you commit to working with the VA, CFO, OMB, and this Committee to prioritize that project?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Thank you, Senator, for the question. It's great to be with you from—and I remember, congratulations on your promotion. I remember when you were at the House, you asked really hard questions. So, yes, I know you asked the Secretary this in his confirmation hearing and he said as much. So, I will, if confirmed, work with him to do that.

Senator BANKS. It means a lot to Indiana, and I appreciate that, and look forward to working with you on that.

Dr. Lawrence, the Deputy Secretary is traditionally the VA chief operating officer, but very little of that responsibility is laid out in the law. What will you be responsible for and how will you prioritize that important role?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Certainly. Thank you for that question, Senator. Yes, that's right. The deputy is the chief operating officer. And it's somewhat described in law, so I'll use that. The Deputy Secretary is responsible for all administrative operations of the VA. Provides governance and oversight, works for the Secretary on agendas, special issues, and other things the Secretary assigns.

Senator BANKS. Good. I know we talked a little bit already about electronic health records, but EHRM has been going on for eight years. In the first Trump term, we worked together closely on oversight of the project. But a lot of Senators still have basic questions about what's going on with it. Do you think the VA has adequately explained the project's objectives and how the strategy has changed over the last eight years?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Thank you very much for that question, Senator. I haven't followed it in detail the last four years. However, the fact that every time I meet with one of you in one of my meetings, you ask questions about this. It almost seems by definition the answer is no. There's too many unanswered questions. And I think if you recall Secretary Collins' testimony, he talked about the importance of transparency. This is one area I think there's much more to do.

Senator BANKS. As you know, I was the chairman of the EHRM Oversight Subcommittee when it was set up in the house in 2018 when the project started. The original plan was for the Veterans

Health Administration to standardize operations across all the medical centers to pave the way for EHR. That never happened, and that's why the project continues to fail. How are you ever going to implement the Oracle EHR without VHA standardizing it?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Thank you very much for that question, Senator. If confirmed, I do want to look into this because the value of having software is not changing the software, but changing the work processes around it, and to the extent you configure it to be like something else before you don't get those advantages.

I'd want to understand if that's going on and why, and what to do to—I think when the Secretary was here, he talked about things are the same everywhere else. They're unique to VA, but things are the same and nobody changes it. These systems work elsewhere because they follow the things you're pointing out. So, if confirmed, I want to look into that and better understand why, and if necessary, how to stop it.

Senator BANKS. Any other feedback or opinions that you developed over the last four years, why this has gotten so off the rails?

Dr. LAWRENCE. The same thing I learned from when we worked together before. I have questions about, and these are things I would confirm when, if confirmed, I would look into; leadership and accountability, changes like what you're potentially describing happening because somebody let it happen, not realizing what's really supposed to happen.

I have a lot of questions about the value proposition. I mean, these tools are supposed to help us help veterans, but yet, I don't hear anybody talking about it this way. Like, this will be a great thing for our veterans because all I hear is it costs too much and it doesn't work, in frustration. But I haven't heard the value proposition, and I think that's something we need to talk more about.

Senator BANKS. Dr. Lawrence, it took the VA 12 years to encourage 1 million veterans to provide their DNA samples for the Million Veteran Program. I don't know, are you familiar with that program?

Dr. LAWRENCE. I'm vaguely, sir.

Senator BANKS. It has promised groundbreaking discoveries. And in reality, it hasn't sequenced most of the DNA samples, and it hasn't produced many results. What's holding the Million Veteran Program back, and how can it be more effective, and will you be committed to taking a strong look at that after you're confirmed?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Yes. Thank you for that. That's sad to learn. That's really sad to learn, especially given those promises. So, yes, if confirmed, I want to look into that. I want to look into why that didn't happen, and I want to know who's in charge of that and what they've been doing.

Senator BANKS. Look forward to working with you on that as well. Thank you very much. I yield back.

Senator TILLIS. Senator Slotkin.

**HON. ELISSA SLOTKIN,
U.S. SENATOR FROM MICHIGAN**

Senator SLOTKIN. Thank you for being here. I've heard nothing but positive things about you from lots of people that we have in

common. And so, I don't question at all your commitment and experience serving our veterans. And I thank you for that.

The problem I have as I come into a hearing like this is that it feels increasingly more and more common that the senior executives at our departments and agencies can want to do the right thing, and can have the right values in mind, and then people just come in on top of them and make decisions.

So, when Secretary Collins was here, someone I served with in the House, I supported him. You know, I asked him very clearly, will you commit to stand in the breach if someone like DOGE or the White House comes in and says, we're going to just full sail, start laying off veterans and Veterans Affairs folks. That you will stand in the breach, and you will not accept cuts to the VA that hurt our veteran care. And he said, yes, and I believed him.

And then, 1,000 people were laid off last week. Many of them veterans. We know because many of us here voted for the PACT Act, you know, helping our 9/11-era veterans who were exposed to burn pits. We've hired a lot of new people to help with veteran care. I can only assume that they are now on the chopping block. Not that you would want it, but that someone comes in over your head and makes those decisions.

Now, you've said here repeatedly that you'll look into it—you'll look into it. I just want to know if you're going to—you know, if you're going to stand and pledge to protect and defend the Constitution, not a President, not a king, but the Constitution, that you're going to stand in the breach and push back. Will you push back if a continued now, not theoretical cuts, but continued cuts continue to be imposed on you that hurt the care to our veterans?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Thank you for the questions, Senator. Yes, I will push back on things that affect the care and benefits of our veterans. I think you heard the Secretary talk about his charge, which is taking care of veterans. I do not believe as described to me, because I was not there, these cuts on Friday affect that.

I understand there's been evidence you're receiving that might be different, but these were designed to be non-mission critical cuts, not in a bargaining unit with a supervisor to provide, you know, relief if that isn't true. So, you're right, I will push back on mission-critical cuts.

Senator SLOTKIN. Please. And then, you know, again, we're told, Mr. Bessent at the Department of the Treasury, you know, told us that, don't worry, DOGE and Mr. Musk are only getting access to "read only" information about taxpayers. And then, that was immediately proved false. That now DOGE and Elon Musk have access to taxpayer information. So, I asked Secretary Collins, what are you going to do when they come for the veterans' information? Will you stand in the breach and say, "We're not going to give you access, temporary, read-only full files for information of our veterans who have served their country." What are you going to do?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Thank you, Senator, for that question. This is a much easier answer. The answer is no you cannot have access to that information. Okay? And my understanding right now is they do not have access to that information. There's one employee, he has access to contract information, general operation information, and management of the IT department.

Just as an aside from what I know from before, access to veterans benefits and health information is strictly guarded. There is a restricted process to do that. So, for example, I could not look at veterans' information. I cannot look at someone on this Committee. The Secretary cannot do that without going through a very difficult—and he's assured, I believe publicly that DOGE employees will not have access to that information.

Senator SLOTKIN. Well, we will be depending on you because theoretically taxpayer information would be deeply sensitive and no Tom, Dick, and Harry can just go in and take random Michiganders' tax information or Medicare, HIPAA health information. All these things were considered sacred.

All these things were things we were always told would be protected, and there's all kinds of restrictions. And then a bunch of 25-year-olds come in and get access the same day the Secretary is talking to us, Secretary of the Treasury. So, whatever what your hopes and dreams are, they don't seem to be living up to what the moment here because people come in.

So, it is not about your commitment to veterans. I understand from lots of people you have it. So, your commitment is going to mean fighting some really tough fights with people on your same political team on this for the sake of veterans. And I'm asking you and imploring you, there's something bigger here than living up to doing whatever Trump says. Protect our veterans, please.

Dr. LAWRENCE. Thank you, Senator. I understand your perspective. I do not know about the tax systems. I do not know about Medicare assistance, but I know about the VA personal information systems. That cannot happen without permission.

Senator SLOTKIN. Great.

Senator TILLIS. Thank you, Senator Slotkin. I think Senator Blumenthal have a couple of other questions. I've got one or two, I'll try to be brief.

It looks like this Cerner implementation is going to go through the very predictable, the initial—either the initial requirements were not well-defined, the complexity of the VISNs application portfolios were not well understood. We maybe got tempted into more customization than we should have. We may have found out data models were more difficult to actually map out the typical sorts of things that I would find in a project review when something goes sideways.

I think it's going to be necessary for you to commit to come before this Committee after a reasonable period of time and give us a traditional "stop, start, continue" of this implementation. What practices got us in the ditch. And it's not going to be just the vendor or the consultants. It's probably going to be because we allowed additional requirements to creep in. But what practices have to be stopped? What practices have to be started? And what part of the implementation is going relatively well and it must be continued?

Can I get a commitment within 90 days of you being confirmed that this Committee gets a report like that?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Thank you very much. I think you're exactly right in the description. I will give you almost a commitment. The 90-day thing, I just don't know that I can guarantee that on, but

absolutely. The Secretary talked about doing the kind of review you're talking about, you know, I imagine so, yes——

Senator TILLIS. I think that's that—Dr. Lawrence, that's fair for you to hold off on the 90-day commitment. But in my experience, anybody worth their salt can figure out what's wrong with a project within 90 days. But I understand why you can't commit to that. But I'd be happy to do it in 90 days. Senator Blumenthal.

Senator KING. Eisenhower retook Europe in 11 months.

[Laughter.]

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I welcome your responses to Senator Slotkin about denying access to Elon Musk, or DOGE, or others who should not have it. Did I hear you correctly on that point?

Dr. LAWRENCE. That's correct. Especially, your last point, sir, about anybody who should not have it.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Will you resign if they do have access, if they are given access to it?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Thank you, Senator, for that question. It's difficult to answer a theoretical question upon which I would have no control. So, I'm not going to comment on that.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Well, how would you stop them if you have no control?

Dr. LAWRENCE. So, Senator, let me see if I could reframe your question.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. My question is pretty clear as it is. How would you stop them if you're not going to resign and raise it as an issue of conscience and conviction?

Dr. LAWRENCE. So, I'm trying to understand, sir. We're talking about a hypothetical whereby somebody gets——

Senator BLUMENTHAL. It's not a hypothetical,

Dr. LAWRENCE. It's a hypothetical at VA, sir.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. It's ongoing or it's on the horizon. They are going to the Department of Defense where national security is an issue. They're going to the Department of Health and Human Services and accessing health records. There are reports that they're already in the VA, even if you discount those reports. This is not a hypothetical. I'm asking you because you stated to Senator Slotkin so clearly that it would be a violation of ethics and law for this information to be given to Elon Musk or anyone else, unauthorized and uncleared.

Dr. LAWRENCE. Thank you, Senator, for clarifying that. I commit to, if confirmed, better understand the situation and try to figure out what the leverage I would have to make sure it doesn't happen.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. I think that response speaks for itself. So, I'm not going to ask another question to follow-up. I want to put in the record the *Federal News Network* article entitled, "Despite exemptions, VA employees still feeling impact from policies shaking up federal workforce," if there's no objection.

Senator TILLIS. Without objection.

[The article referred to appears on page 109 of the Appendix.]

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you. You know, just for the record since there's been some reference to the Biden administration. In fact, President Biden instituted a strategic pause allowing facilities

and local leadership to make staffing decisions as long as it didn't increase costs and to make cuts.

As a result, there was bipartisan opposition to that step. As a matter of fact, the staffing at the VA grew, not declined, by a net of, I think, 10,000 employees because VHA recognized that hiring staff actually saves money by bringing VA healthcare back in-house from the community.

I invite my Republican colleagues to join me in the current proposal for cuts just as we joined together to oppose the potential Biden cuts in staffing that were not cost effective.

Let me ask you, Dr. Lawrence where do you live?

Dr. LAWRENCE. In Virginia, sir.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. And what is the VA healthcare facility nearest to where you live?

Dr. LAWRENCE. I don't know. I don't use VHA healthcare. I believe it is Washington, DC.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Why do you not use VA healthcare?

Dr. LAWRENCE. I'm ineligible. My service was such that I'm ineligible for healthcare. In addition, I've always been in the private sector, and I've always had private care. And even if I were eligible, quite frankly, I would be thinking about those who need it more than me, and I probably wouldn't have used it.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. You wouldn't use VA healthcare even if you were——

Dr. LAWRENCE. I didn't say that. What I said sir, was because I had private care, that even if I had access to VA healthcare, I wouldn't use it because I'd be thinking people who were in much more difficult situations than me because my healthcare has been very good, need access to that care more.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Do you have any direct experience? Have you ever received healthcare from the VA?

Dr. LAWRENCE. No, I have not.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. When's the last time you were in a VA healthcare facility?

Dr. LAWRENCE. When I was in the first administration, I regularly visited them when I would visit regional benefits office, and I would often visit because they were next to the healthcare thing. We held claims clinics in VA medical facilities.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. You haven't been in a VA healthcare facility since your service ended in the Trump administration?

Dr. LAWRENCE. That's correct.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. When you were Under Secretary of the Veterans Benefit Administration, you had 24,000 employees in 56 separate regional offices working for you. Correct?

Dr. LAWRENCE. That's correct.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. How many of those employees do you think should be fired?

Dr. LAWRENCE. I'm unaware, sir, of what's going on there now. When I left——

Senator BLUMENTHAL. When you were there, how many did you think should be fired?

Dr. LAWRENCE. When I left there, they were producing at the highest level they had ever produced in their history. Some left

through attrition, some left to get better jobs, but it was a very solid workforce. And when——

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Would you have fired any of those 24,000 when you were there?

Dr. LAWRENCE. I'm sorry, the first part of your question, sir,

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Would you have fired any of those 24,000 employees when you were there?

Dr. LAWRENCE. So, we didn't really have to, sir. Because by measuring performance, the bad ones understood they were bad performers, and they generally left before the HR systems had to go after them.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. So, you didn't think Elon Musk was necessary or the DOGE transition operation, the firing that they're now doing was necessary, then?

Dr. LAWRENCE. It was many fewer employees. Right now, I believe VBA has about 35,000 employees. So, I could be wrong. A lot of hiring has taking place since we left, so I don't know what those folks are doing.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. And as to those 56 regional offices, did you recommend at the time you were Under Secretary that any be closed?

Dr. LAWRENCE. No, I did not. I began my tenure by announcing that we would close no offices, and that during my period of time, the number of employees would be equal to or greater than when I left.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Dr. Lawrence, do you think the PACT Act is working?

Dr. LAWRENCE. So, thank you, Senator for that question. I have a lot of observations based on anecdotes, so I don't want to comment. You know, if confirmed, I really want to dig into this more closely. Some of the things that are very positive, as we pointed out, more veterans are coming to get care, more veterans are applying for benefits. It's easier to deal with burn pits. You could do it one off when I was Under Secretary, and I think that was difficult for veterans.

At the same time, I worry that the backlog is large and growing. I worry also about some of the things we talked, to Senator Gallego, about the communication, the like. So, I think there's opportunities for improvement, but by and large, when you consider the objectives when it was discussed and passed, it looks successful.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. You think that we should have the PACT Act that the presumptions for care and benefits is justified?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Yes. In that one, yes.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. And as to that backlog, do you commit to trying to end it?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Yes, absolutely. That would be part of my charge. If confirmed. As Deputy Secretary, I'm responsible for the performance of the Under Secretary for benefits. That will be one of the key critical factors they focus on, which is processing claims in a timely and accurate manner.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Would you agree that, potentially, more VA members are necessary staff and others to make the PACT Act work?

Dr. LAWRENCE. Yes. Thank you for that question. Yes, potentially, more employees. Potentially, more technology. Potentially, more of both. Potentially, more assistance from other vendors who know how to do this. Absolutely. We should examine——

Senator BLUMENTHAL. If the Musk operation is causing a cut in those employees, it could be increasing the backlog.

Dr. LAWRENCE. If VA decides to, and this is hypothetical, if VA decides to lay off mission critical employees who are processing benefits, by definition, it would increase the backlog.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Will you resign if that happens?

Dr. LAWRENCE. No, sir. I'll prevent that from happening.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you.

Senator TILLIS. Senator King for a brief question.

Senator KING. Yes, thank you. Just two quick. In 2020, *Project 2025*, which you contributed to, I know in a limited way, but you were involved in the veterans part. One of the points it says, "Reduce improper payment and fraud. About \$500 million is improperly paid out each year." Are veterans frauds? Are veterans committing fraud?

Dr. LAWRENCE. No, sir. What that refers to is sort of the following. This is what tends to be what happens. When a veteran passes, for example, their heirs often don't tell VA that the veteran is passed. Their disability compensation money continues to be paid.

Senator KING. So, that would be improper, but they use the word fraud.

Dr. LAWRENCE. Well, this is the broad category of fraud. Fraud happened——

Senator KING. I don't see how you're going to ferret that out without getting into the individual medical records of veterans, which you've testified——

Dr. LAWRENCE. Sure.

Senator KING [continuing]. Isn't going to happen.

Dr. LAWRENCE. Sure. Let me give you an example of fraud. Let me give you an example of fraud. In call centers in the world's best companies, you're not allowed to bring your cell phone in because you can take pictures of information, which can be used to do identity theft. When I arrived at VBA call centers, no such rule existed. Vet employees were able to take pictures of confidential information and perpetuate identity theft. That's fraud at our veterans by poor processes.

Senator KING. Completely agree. But in order to ferret out the \$500 million of fraud, which isn't substantiated in any way, it's going to be necessary to dig into those medical records to see, for example, who died and who didn't. I just don't see how you can have it both ways. If you're going to go after that, then you can't say we're never going to look at a veteran's records.

Dr. LAWRENCE. Certainly, sir. No, I respectfully disagree. You get death information from people who scour coroner's information. That's provided daily.

Senator KING. I understand that, but there'll be—let me move on. One of the most disturbing things in *Project 2025* says this, "The next administration should explore how the reviews would be accelerated with clearance from OMB to target significant cost sav-

ings from revising disability rating awards—” that’s a change in benefits for future claimants. And listen to this, “while preserving them fully or partially for existing claimants, or partially as a pregnant term.”

That means you’re talking about potentially reducing benefits for people who are getting them now. Do you support that provision in this report of which you’re one of the authors?

Dr. LAWRENCE. No, sir, I do not. Well, let me clarify. The rating schedule aligns benefits to your disability.

Senator KING. Right.

Dr. LAWRENCE. There’s an ongoing review. GAO encourages VA to do those more regularly, for example. Okay? But any change to the rating schedule, I would defer to the Secretary and the President. But as we talked about, our intention is not to reduce benefits.

Senator KING. Well, I’m glad to hear you say that, but the phrase, “while preserving benefits fully or partially for existing claimants,” is not very reassuring to the veterans of this country.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator TILLIS. Thank you, Senator King. And Mr. Lawrence, we’re at the end. I imposed the Moran rule. I know that Chair Moran tended to allow his members to ask follow-up questions. So, I hope that I honored his tradition in the hearing versus cutting off, which we sometimes do in other committee meetings, Senator Blumenthal.

But, Mr. Lawrence, you were voted out of Committee with a voice vote when you were up the last time. That’s a strong statement about the qualifications you put forth because controversial nominees don’t get a voice vote. Not only did you get a voice vote in the Committee, but you got a voice vote on the floor. And in my examination of your time that you were in this position, you got pretty strong marks for being forthright, focused, and good on execution. And I believe that there’s every indication of your past work.

There are challenging times. There will be instances where HQ may ask you to do things that in your professional judgment are not the best way to optimize refining the approach to the PACT Act, or any number of policies that only you and the Secretary are going to be familiar with. So, you owe it to the administration when you believe well-intended ideas for efficiency or other objectives are not in sync with your core mission of improving care and access to veterans. I have every confidence that you’ll do that in a professional way, and you owe it to the President to look around corners for people who may be advising on matters that are on their face, look like a good idea, but those in the trenches who have to execute it. I think you’ll use sound judgment going forward.

I look forward to your confirmation. So, if there are no other questions, again, I want to thank you for coming before the Committee, the Committee members asking very important questions. Each member has five legislative days in which to revise and extend their remarks. Incidentally, and any member who would like to send questions to Dr. Lawrence should send them to the Committee clerk as soon as possible, but no later than noon tomorrow.

Dr. Lawrence, again, I appreciate your response. Congratulations to the family for this honor to be nominated. And with that, this hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:30 a.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

**Nomination Material for
HON. PAUL LAWRENCE**

Prepared Statement of Paul R. Lawrence, Ph.D.,
Nominee to be Deputy Secretary for the
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Before the Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States Senate

February 19, 2025

Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, distinguished members of the committee – thank you for the opportunity to be here today and for considering my nomination.

I would also like to thank President Trump for the honor of this nomination and his trust in me. Today, I hope to earn your trust as well.

I am fortunate to be joined by my lovely wife of 39 years, Anne, my son, Dr. Gregory Lawrence, an optometrist who did his residency at the Hampton VA Medical Center and my brother Chris Lawrence, also an Army Veteran and Airborne Ranger. I also want to thank my 100-year-old mother who is watching at home right now. I wouldn't be here without all of their love and support.

The Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs has a long history of bipartisan accomplishments on behalf of America's Veterans. Your commitment to taking care of the men and women who have worn the uniform is above reproach, and I want you to know I share that commitment.

The sacrifices of military Veterans and their loved ones are my own. I've lived them.

I grew up in an Army family. My father served 24 years, with deployments in the Korean and Vietnam Wars. He taught me many valuable lessons about leadership and what it means to serve.

My middle name, Reynold, was given to me in honor of my uncle, who was killed fighting in Normandy.

My family's love of country and tradition of service compelled my brother and I to join the Army, where we were both commissioned through ROTC. During my tenure in the military, I graduated from the Army's Airborne School, earned the Meritorious Service Medal and rose to the rank of captain.

My Army service taught me the value of leading with integrity, honor and respect. But most importantly, it instilled in me a dedication to serving my fellow Veterans that has shaped my life's work.

I spent many years working as a consultant, helping bring efficiencies to large organizations. Then, I had the opportunity during the first Trump administration to serve as VA's Under Secretary for Benefits – one of the most rewarding experiences of my career.

In that role, I led more than 24,000 employees as they administered a range of benefits, including disability compensation, pensions, education, home loans, Veterans' readiness and employment, and life insurance.

During my time at VA, our Veterans Benefits Administration team made great strides in increasing productivity, customer service and convenience for Veterans. Here are a few highlights of which I'm particularly proud:

- During my time at VBA, the disability claim backlog was reduced to its lowest in history.

- VBA guaranteed a record 1.2 million home loans for Veterans in FY 2020 – surpassing the previous record of 700,000.
- We successfully launched the GI Bill, the Appeals Modernization Act, and the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act.
- We successfully launched Solid Start and the Veterans Benefits Banking Program.
- VBA reduced improper payments by more than \$350 million.
- I conducted over 100 telephone town halls that reached nearly 5.7 million people and I took more than 1,500 unfiltered questions about how we were serving Veterans.
- And, thanks to aggressive hiring and training, we saw the highest number of Vocational Counselors in place at VBA.

If I have the privilege of returning to VA, I will work to build on the many bipartisan successes of this committee. To that end, I pledge to work with you to:

- Get VA's electronic health record modernization effort back on track.
- Ensure VA provides Veterans with the health care choices and options Congress promised them as part of the MISSION Act.
- Properly and faithfully implement the PACT Act, and

- Put veterans at the center of everything the department does and make accountability, customer service and caring the cornerstones of service among the department's work force.

If confirmed, I will be a tireless advocate for the men and women who have fought for our liberty. I will work to ensure every eligible Veteran and VA beneficiary gets the benefits and services they've earned at their convenience. And I will fulfill VA's mission, which President Lincoln first set out 160 years ago next month.

Thank you and I am happy to take your questions.

**Pre-Hearing Questions for Paul Lawrence
Nominee for Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs
From Senator Jerry Moran
Chairman, Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs**

February 13, 2025

1. Please detail the professional and personal experiences that you believe have prepared you to help lead the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

Growing up in a military family, I watched as my father, a career Army officer, sacrificed during his service in two wars and duty away from home. His experience in Korea and Vietnam, alongside my own experience as a Veteran shape my mindset around supporting Veterans and their families. I understand what it means to commit periods of one's life to defending our country and our way of life. I know the challenges of transitioning from service back to civilian life because I've experienced them myself.

I've spent the majority of my professional career as a businessman, leading and managing teams and organizations. I worked with leaders in the federal government to improve efficiency and effectiveness in their organizations before serving as VA's Under Secretary for Benefits.

During my time as USB, I learned invaluable lessons about VA's operations, infrastructure and culture.

These experiences have provided me the ability to hit the ground running on day one, if confirmed.

2. What do you think are the most significant challenges facing VA? If confirmed, what would your highest priorities be as Deputy Secretary and what would you intend to accomplish during your tenure?

VA is facing a number of challenges that would guide my work at the department, including:

- Fiscal stewardship: recent difficulties handling the budget need to be addressed. Related to this are improper payments and fraud, waste, and abuse.
- Adherence to the MISSION Act: Veterans continue to report difficulties accessing community care, even though the intent of the law is clear.
- Electronic Health Record Modernization: EHRM has taken too long and the costs are escalating. A plan to complete this initiative needs to be developed and implemented.
- Veteran homelessness: This is a major priority for President Trump.
- Veteran suicide: The solution to this perennial challenge starts with reaching the roughly 40 percent of Veterans who die by suicide who have had no contact with VA.

3. What lessons did you learn from your previous experience as Under Secretary for Benefits and how will you utilize those, if confirmed as Deputy Secretary?

I learned many important lessons while serving as USB, including:

- VA has a strong and capable workforce, a significant number of whom are Veterans who also use VA services.
- VA stakeholders, including members of Congress and Veterans Service Organizations need to be engaged regularly and can provide valuable insight and feedback.

I was most successful motivating VA employees to serve Veterans when I:

- Articulated what we were doing and why.
- Communicated to individuals, teams, or units what their specific roles and tasks were.
- Measured how the tasks were being completed, gave regular feedback and made changes as appropriate.

If confirmed, I look forward to putting this experience to work to ensure we continue to deliver world class care and benefits to Veterans, families, caregivers and survivors.

4. What do you think is the appropriate role of VA in an average veteran's life and, if confirmed how would you work to improve outcomes among the veterans, caregivers, survivors, and others who use VA health care, benefits, and services?

Military service should accelerate a Veteran's ability to pursue the American dream, and the services and benefits VA provides are an important vehicle to help achieve that dream.

If confirmed, I will follow the direction of Secretary Collins, who has stressed the need to focus on customer service and convenience while placing Veterans at the center of everything VA does. If we do those things, outcomes for Veterans, families, caregivers and survivors will improve.

5. What do you see as the role of this Committee, specifically, and Congressional oversight, in general, and will you commit to providing timely and accurate responses to Congressional inquiries?

SVAC serves a vital function in passing laws that govern VA and providing oversight of the department's operations and programs. If confirmed, I will provide timely and accurate responses to congressional inquiries.

6. What is your view of artificial intelligence and what role, if any, do you think it could play in enhancing services and improving efficiency across VA?

I believe automation and AI can be used to expedite disability claims processing and improve the accuracy of decisions.

I am agnostic about specific technologies, as the field is constantly changing. And while technology can and should be used to improve and expedite the workflow of assembling a claim, I believe the final decision to award or deny benefits should be made by a VBA employee.

- 7. If confirmed, you will serve as co-chair of the Joint Executive Council with the Department of Defense (DOD). What issues would you prioritize working on in that role to better support veterans, particularly those transitioning out of the military?**

If confirmed, I will prioritize the transition from DOD to VA for our service members as they become Veterans with an emphasis on the seamless transfer of health and service data to ensure timely care and benefits. In this regard, I would like to build on the pre-transition health care registration plan developed during the first Trump administration.

I would also prioritize how VA and DOD work together as transitioning servicemembers find post-service employment and housing – two of the most important factors to a successful transition.

- 8. If confirmed, you will serve as VA's chief operating officer and be responsible for managing the electronic health record modernization (EHRM) initiative. What experience do you believe has prepared you to oversee the most complex medical record modernization in the nation's history? Given the ongoing challenges with EHRM, how would you, if confirmed, enhance oversight and make certain the new system is fully implemented and functioning as intended to improve care for veterans? Will you commit to implementing more robust planning and support to prevent delays and make certain future roll outs are timely, successful, effective, and well-integrated?**

If confirmed, I commit to reviewing VA's current EHRM challenges and coming up with a robust plan to ensure a successful rollout.

I agree with Sec. Collins that getting this right is imperative and that we need to look at ways to get the job done as quickly as possible while ensuring patient safety. If confirmed, I pledge to help VA do just that while working with SVAC and other relevant committees along the way.

- 9. If confirmed, how would you, as VA's chief operating officer, work across the enterprise and with the Under Secretaries for Health, Benefits, and Memorial Affairs to mitigate the current siloed structure between VA's three administrations?**

If confirmed, I will work closely and collaborate with VA's three under secretaries to align priorities, manage daily operations, and pursue key initiatives. One important area of emphasis will be my personal engagement. Past experience suggests regular one-on-one meeting with each can be an effective way to do this. I will also encourage the under secretaries to build relationships with one another to reduce the need for senior-level intervention.

- 10. If confirmed, how would you, as VA's chief operating officer, ensure the responsible and effective use of resources in maintaining, managing, and constructing VA infrastructure, ranging from an ever-growing portfolio of national cemeteries and aging medical centers to building new VA facilities and rebalancing VA's national footprint?**

If confirmed, I would work closely with Secretary Collins to enact his priorities while ensuring the responsible and effective use of resources across VA.

- 11. If confirmed, how would you leverage the Veterans Experience Office to make certain that veterans as well as their families, caregivers, and survivors, are able to navigate seamlessly among VA's three administrations?**

If confirmed, I will work with VEO to utilize its tools and resources to stay abreast of the needs communicated by our Veterans, families, caregivers, and survivors. This will help us determine what processes or operations need to be improved as we work with leaders across all three administrations to continue improving the department.

- 12. If confirmed, how would you approach workforce management at VA, including ensuring high-performing employees are selected and quickly onboarded and poor performers are identified and appropriately held to account?**

VA needs top talent and high performers to deliver world-class service. One way to address this is to identify and address poor performers. In some instances, better training will help. But VA also needs to have an effective and efficient process to exit chronically poor performers. If confirmed, I will ensure VA uses all of the tools at its disposal to remove employees who fall short of the mission.

Another way to retain top talent is to recruit and quickly onboard very strong candidates. If confirmed, I will review this process and encourage sharing best practices across administrations to leverage what is working well.

- 13. With your background as Under Secretary for Benefits, you understand the capacity limitations in place for the current system of eligible individuals who are accredited to assist veterans in the claims process. What is your view of the role of private sector entities to become accredited and assist veterans in the disability claims process? If confirmed, what, if any, expansions to these authorities do you think would be helpful?**

If confirmed, I will review what can be done to ensure high standards for those who file claims on behalf of Veterans and how bad actors can be identified and held accountable.

- 14. What is your view of the role veteran choice and patient preference should play, if any, in the VA healthcare system? If confirmed, how would you make certain that veterans are at the center of the**

health care decision-making process, including when it comes to determinations regarding best medical interest and community care?

I echo Secretary Collins in his belief that Veteran choice and convenience should be at the center of everything VA does. If confirmed, I will work to ensure VA understands its patient base and provides the benefits and services those who depend on the department need in a way that's convenient for them.

- 15. If confirmed, will you commit to supporting State Veterans Homes and make certain that VA maintains a strong relationship with State governments, especially as they work through the VA State Veterans Home Construction Grant Program (SHCGP) process?**

Yes.

- 16. If confirmed, will you commit to bolstering VA programs to support aging veterans and ensure that related legislation follows Congressional intent?**

Yes.

- 17. If confirmed, how will you make certain that the Department expeditiously works with the Government Accountability Office and the Office of Inspector General to address and close out open recommendations?**

If confirmed, I review the current process for engaging with GAO and OIG. Specifically, I will focus on how issues are identified by those offices as well as the process for addressing and closing out GAO and OIG recommendations.

- 18. If the White House, the Office of Management and Budget, or the Office of Personnel Management are working on or issue a directive or guidance that you believe could have an adverse impact on VA's services and benefits for veterans, what will you do?**

I would work with the relevant entities to avoid any adverse impacts.

Pre-Hearing Questions for Presumptive Nominee The Honorable Paul Lawrence to be Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs

From Senator Richard Blumenthal

- 1. Have you spoken to President Trump or Congressman Collins about the expectations of your role as Deputy Secretary, if confirmed? If so, please summarize these expectations.**

Secretary Collins and I discussed that – should we both be confirmed – the expectations for Deputy Secretary would include supporting and assisting him in executing President Trump’s agenda, placing veterans at the center of everything VA does and ensuring we provide world-class services and support for veterans, their families, caregivers and survivors.

- 2. The Deputy Secretary position has historically functioned as VA’s Chief Operating Officer. Please describe in detail your understanding of the roles and responsibilities for VA’s COO.**

The Deputy Secretary is VA’s Chief Operating Officer. Consequently, if confirmed, my responsibilities would include:

- Supporting the secretary as needed
- Overseeing VA operations and functions under the deputy secretary’s purview
- Directing VA policy and operations and ensuring they align with the secretary’s intent
- Leading formal governance activities and boards
- Leading specific initiative as directed by the secretary or law
- Serving as a liaison to key stakeholders
- Leading crisis management as needed

- 3. If confirmed, what would be your top three specific and measurable goals as Deputy Secretary and how would you achieve them?**

Timely and coordinated access to health care: I will continuously monitor the time it takes to get an appointment and the number of appointments completed to ensure we are taking proper care of VA’s patient base. Simultaneously, I will spearhead VA’s electronic health record modernization efforts, working to get the program back on track as quickly, efficiently and safely as possible.

Timely and accurate processing of benefits applications: Veterans need their benefits quickly and accurately. All benefits should have productivity targets, and I will work to ensure we meet those targets. As the largest benefit, disability compensation will receive extra attention. I will monitor the backlog, number of claims completed, average days to complete, and accuracy measures to ensure we are doing right by Veterans.

Timely and appropriate memorial services: I will monitor the average number of days it takes to schedule and complete ceremonies as well as family satisfaction surveys to ensure NCA is providing excellent service.

4. What do you see as the biggest challenges facing the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) at this time – externally, in the VA as a whole, and specifically in the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), Veterans Health Administration (VHA), National Cemetery Administration (NCA), or other Staff Offices or key Department operations?

VA is facing a number of challenges across the department, including:

- Fiscal stewardship: recent difficulties handling the budget need to be addressed. Related to this are improper payments and fraud, waste, and abuse.
- Adherence to the MISSION Act: Veterans continue to report difficulties accessing community care, even though the intent of the law is clear.
- Electronic Health Record Modernization: EHRM has taken too long and the costs are escalating. A plan to complete this initiative needs to be developed and implemented.
- Veteran homelessness: This is a major priority for President Trump.
- Veteran suicide: The solution to this perennial challenge starts with reaching the roughly 40 percent of Veterans who die by suicide who have had no contact with VA.

5. Do we have your commitment that you will cooperate with the Department's Office of Inspector General, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) and the Office of Special Counsel (OSC), respect those offices' independence and cooperate them as required by law?

Yes

6. Without getting into your specific medical history or information, as a Veteran, have you used a Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), services, benefit, or program? If so, what was your experience with accessing those services?

I used the Home Loan Guaranty benefit to purchase my first home. My experience was positive.

7. As the statutory Co-Chair of the Joint Executive Council, what areas of work with DOD would you prioritize? And do you support VA initiative from 2018 known as "pre-transition health care registration" that was established in response to President Trump's Executive Order 13822 and described in detail in the Joint Action Plan dated May 3, 2018?

If confirmed, I will prioritize the transition from DOD to VA for our service members as they become Veterans with an emphasis on the seamless transfer of health and service

data to ensure timely care and benefits. In this regard, I would like to build on the pre-transition health care registration plan developed during the first Trump administration.

I would also prioritize how VA and DOD work together as transitioning servicemembers find post-service employment and housing – two of the most important factors to a successful transition.

8. How would describe your relationships with veterans' service organization? What are your plans to involve VSOs and other stakeholders in informing decisions you make on behalf of the Department?

As Under Secretary for Benefits, I had good relationships with the VSOs. I reinstituted a regular monthly meeting to discuss VBA operations and solicit their input. When invited, I attended and spoke at their conferences. When I travelled to visit VBA offices, I often stopped in at VSO posts to meet their members and host unscripted town halls. Importantly, I appointed a full-time VSO liaison at VBA, whose sole job as to collaborate with the VSOs. I believe this was well-received.

If confirmed, I expect to continue regular engagement and collaboration with VSOs. I have found this to be a valuable way to learn about timely issues and gather insights based on the range of experiences of their members.

9. If confirmed, how would you work to ensure members of Congress are advised in advance of VA problems, issues, and emerging matters, particularly when those matters are specific to the state a member represents?

If confirmed, I will work hard to follow Secretary Collins' expressed desire to work closely with members, not only providing information as it emerges, but also soliciting information that members are hearing from their constituents. I will seek Congress' feedback as to how this can be done most effectively.

10. Do you agree to supply the Committee with such non-privileged information, materials, and documents as may be requested by the Committee in its oversight and legislative capacities for so long as you serve in the position of Deputy Secretary?

Yes.

11. If confirmed, do you commit to full compliance with all applicable provisions of the Hatch Act and related statutes, regulations, and ethics policies of the Department as it relations to the separation of partisan activities from your official duties and functions as Deputy Secretary? Will you commit to taking Hatch Act training within your first month of assuming office and requiring all political appointees when in Senate-confirmed positions or not, to also do so within the same timeframe.

Yes.

- 12. If confirmed, how will you work with employee unions? What was your experience dealing with union or employees who have collective bargaining rights? Will you respect collective bargaining agreements that are currently in force?**

If confirmed, I will adhere to our legal obligations and work together to help the Veterans we are charged with serving, as well as VA employees.

- 13. If confirmed, what steps would you take to further support the mission of VA's Office of Resolution Management, Diversity & Inclusion (ORMDI) which handles important equal employment, diversity, and resolution management activities?**

I believe this office is now called the Office of Resolution Management. If confirmed, I will ensure it adheres to its responsibilities, per the secretary's guidance and the law.

- 14. What is your view of the role of whistleblowers? If confirmed, will you encourage whistleblowing by the Department's employees? Please explain. How do you plan to deal with incidents of senior leader misconduct to include whistleblower retaliation and partner with VA's Office of Accountability and Whistleblower Protection?**

If confirmed, I will encourage all employees – including whistleblowers – to point out problems and identify solutions. I will not tolerate any retaliation against those who do so. I will also work to improve accountability among employees at all levels. I worked well with OAWP in the past and I would do so in the future, if confirmed.

- 15. At any time during your service as Under Secretary for Benefits were you involved in any incidents of physical assault, inappropriate physical contact, or harassment in any form to include with employees, stakeholders, or visitors to the Department? If so, please explain.**

No.

- 16. In Project 2025, you are noted as contributing to the writing of Chapter 20. Please describe your contributions to this chapter, and if there are policies or verbiage in the chapter you do not support.**

I've long been a champion of Veterans benefits delivery and written about how we can improve services to those who have worn the uniform.

- 17. To achieve cost savings, VA and the Office of Management and Budget have been urged to consider reforms to the VA Schedule for Rating Disabilities. If confirmed, what reforms to the VASRD would you propose or support? Specifically, do you support means-testing VA disability compensation benefits or limiting compensation to veterans rated 30 percent service-connected disabled or higher?**

If confirmed as deputy secretary, I would defer to the secretary and the president on any needed reforms to the VASRD.

- 18. VA has increased use of automation and artificial intelligence with the aim of expediting disability claims processing and improving accuracy of claims decisions. Are there specific technology solutions you suggest VA adopt? Also, do you believe VA should adopt end-to-end automation for processing disability benefits claims?**

I believe automation and AI can be used to expedite disability claims processing and improve the accuracy of decisions.

I am agnostic about specific technologies, as the field is constantly changing. And while technology can and should be used to improve and expedite the workflow of assembling a claim, I believe the final decision to award or deny benefits should be made by a VBA employee.

- 19. Given your experience as Under Secretary for Benefits, do you believe claims adjudicators (veterans service representatives and rating service representatives) should be exempt from a hiring freeze? Does VBA have the sufficient physical infrastructure to support all of its claims and appeals adjudication workforce working in-person? If confirmed, would you recommend continuing telework agreements for VA employees who adjudicate claims and appeals for veterans' benefits?**

If confirmed, I will review the resources – people, technology, and workspace – devoted to processing claims to determine the answers to these questions. I will share the results of this review with SVAC and other relevant committees.

- 20. If confirmed as Deputy Secretary, you would lead a workforce of more than 450,000 – a third of whom are veterans, more than a third of whom are women, more than 10 percent have a disability – and representing a wide range of racial and ethnic groups that are also found in our military and society at large. This same diversity exists among the veterans VA serves. Do you commit to treating all of these employees and veterans with dignity and respect?**

Yes.

- 21. On December 20, 2024, VA announced it would exit its EHRM “reset” period, continue reforms to better serve veterans and VA clinical staff, and methodically move towards a spring 2026 deployment following readiness data, on-the-ground feedback, and the implementation of needed IT development and code changes agreed upon by VA and Oracle Health. If confirmed, do you commit to following these plans, consistent with Congressional direction, that focus on prioritizing the health and safety of veterans, providing VA clinical staff the tools they need to deliver high quality health care, and protecting the taxpayer’s investment through**

aggressive contractor oversight?

I agree with Secretary Collins' perspective that getting this right is imperative and that we need to look at ways to get the job done as quickly as possible while ensuring patient safety. If confirmed, I pledge to help VA do just that while working with this and other relevant committees along the way.

- 22. VA has attempted to crack down on groups assisting veterans with applying for benefits without accreditation, but so far has yet to make a dent in this illegal activity. Will you commit to ensuring veterans don't have to pay for assistance with filing their initial claims?**

If confirmed, I will review what can be done to ensure high standards for those who file claims on behalf of Veterans and how bad actors can be identified and held accountable.

- 23. During President Trump's first term, OMB proposed to reduce disability compensation benefits for the most severely ill and injured veterans simply because they reached retirement age. What is your position on this issue?**

My understanding is that this would require legislative action.

- 24. Do you support the PACT Act's approach of providing dedicated mandatory funding to pay for health care and benefits for toxic-exposed veterans?**

If confirmed, I will adhere to the funding mechanisms determined by Congress.

- 25. Under the last administration, VA attempted to solicit bids for a new supply chain modernization technology, but ultimately did not move forward with any products. How will you prioritize upgrading VA's outdated supply chain technology?**

If confirmed, I will review the previous effort to understand the objective, challenges, and decision to not go forward. I will also review VA's present supply chain processes and technology for efficiency and cost. As appropriate, I will review possible plans to upgrade the process and technology, appreciating cost, timing, and demands on VA personnel. I will share the results of these reviews and possible upgrade plans with SVAC and other relevant committees.

Follow Up Pre-Hearing Questions for Presumptive Nominee The Honorable Paul Lawrence to be Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs

From Senator Richard Blumenthal

- 1. Your response to the Committee's Questionnaire notes you were self-employed from January 2021 to December 2024. Please describe the nature of that self-employment; what type of work did you do, on what topics or projects did you work, how did you receive income (i.e. were you an independent contractor or employee, and were you paid per project, by the hour, on retainer) and did you employ any other individuals during that period?**

I was self-employed as an independent consultant. I employed no other individuals. I received income through a retainer with each client.

I provided strategic advice and insights into government operations, problems, and challenges to help them better pursue new business with Federal Government agencies. Generally, each company was working on solutions that would improve efficiency and effectiveness.

- 2. Regarding your position as US Department of Veterans Affairs, Under Secretary for Benefits: Did you oversee or manage anyone who oversaw the procurement or management of any contracts, agreements, or other activity involving any of your previous employers or companies that you had previously been compensated by?**

No. These functions were multiple management levels below my position as the Under Secretary for Benefits.

- 3. Regarding your position as an Independent Consultant for a Federal Contractor from July 2005-February 2006: Please describe the nature of your work and how you received income from the Federal Contractor (i.e., were you paid per project, by the hour or on retainer).**

I worked as an independent consultant to the MITRE Corporation. I was paid by the hour. I worked on a project for the CIO of DoD dealing with new technology to assemble and organize information for service members in combat.

Questions regarding OGE Form 278e – responses will be controlled.

- 4. Regarding BDR Solutions LLC, Fidelis Technology, General Dynamics Information Technology, Steerbridge Strategies, HLP Integration, CGI, Accenture and Purpose-Built Family Foundation: Please describe the nature of your relationship with each of these companies and if you were an employee or independent contractor. Please describe the work you accomplished for each and how you were compensated (per project, by the hour, on retainer, etc.)**

During my work for each I was an independent contractor. I was not an employee. I was compensated via a retainer.

For Purpose Built Families, I helped them establish a performance measurement system for their operations, reviewing the results monthly with their leaders, and offering suggestions to improve service.

For BDR Solutions LLC, Fidelis Technology, General Dynamics Information Technology, Steerbridge Strategies, HLP Integration, CGI, and Accenture, I provided strategic advice and insights into government operations, problems, and challenges to help them better pursue new business with Federal Government agencies. Generally, each company was working on solutions that would improve efficiency and effectiveness.

Senator Richard Blumenthal, Ranking Member
Questions for the Record
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
Nomination Hearing of Paul Lawrence
February 19, 2025

1. Since leaving your position as Under Secretary for Benefits, you have reported advising non-profits and businesses about veterans' issues.
 - a. During that time, have you been employed or advised companies who do business with VA?

Response: Yes

- b. If confirmed, do you commit to recusing yourself from decisions impacting your former clients consistent with current law, practice, and regulations, with the guidance of career officials in the VA Office of General Counsel and the Office of Government Ethics; and entering into formal signed agreements on these matters?

Response: OGE has provided a list of restrictions which I have agreed to adhere to, if confirmed.

2. If confirmed, you would be the statutory Co-Chair of the VA/DOD Joint Executive Committee (JEC), which works to enhance cooperation and collaboration between VA, DOD and DOL, and develops and implements the DOD-VA Joint Strategic Plan.
 - a. What are your main priorities related to JEC and DOD?

Response: If confirmed, I will prioritize the transition from DOD to VA for our service members as they become Veterans with emphasis on seamless transfer of health and service data to ensure timely care with benefits.

I will also prioritize how VA and DOD work together as transitioning service members find post-service employment and housing – two of the most important factors to a successful transition.

- b. What do you think the greatest challenges are with relation to VA's collaboration with DOD?

Response: If confirmed, I will review the current relationship with DOD and VA to better understand current challenges.

- c. How will you encourage DOD to be more engaged in this interagency process?

Response: If confirmed, I will personally engage with my DOD counterparts working DOD/VA issues. This will be in addition to time spent on the JEC.

3. In December, VA announced it would exit its EHRM “reset” period, continue reforms to better serve veterans and VA clinical staff, and move towards a spring 2026 deployment.

- a. If confirmed, do you commit to following these plans?

Response: If confirmed, I commit to reviewing VA’s current EHRM challenges and coming up with a robust plan to ensure a successful rollout.

- b. To what extent will you act in accordance with Congressional direction?

Response: If confirmed, I will follow the laws which govern EHRM.

- c. As EHRM moves forward, how will you prioritize your focus?

Response: If confirmed, my priority will be providing the greatest benefits to our Veterans, as quickly and as conveniently as possible.

Senator Bernard Sanders
Questions for the Record
U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Hearing to Consider Pending Nominations
February 19, 2025

Questions for the Honorable Paul Lawrence Ph.D., Nominee to be Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs

- 1) How many VA employees were fired between January 20, 2025 and February 19, 2025? How many of these employees were probationary? Provide a breakdown by agency, position type, and justification for termination for each category of employee at each agency.
 - a. **Response:** I have not been confirmed yet and therefore do not have access to this information at this time.
- 2) How were VA employees notified that they were being fired, and on what grounds? Provide the method of communication and content of the message employees received.
Response: I have not been confirmed yet and therefore do not have access to this information at this time.
- 3) Provide any analysis conducted prior to firings to determine the immediate and long-term impact it will have on programs and activities those employees were tasked with administering.
Response: I have not been confirmed yet and therefore do not have access to this information at this time.
- 4) What role did DOGE have in identifying or prioritizing employees for termination? What metrics did they use?
Response: I have not been confirmed yet and therefore do not have access to this information at this time.
- 5) As additional layoffs are anticipated according to the Executive Order, *Implementing the President's "Department of Government Efficiency" Workforce Optimization Initiative*, what specific guidance was given to the VA for identifying additional employees to lay off?
Response: I have not been confirmed yet and therefore do not have access to this information at this time.
- 6) Will you commit to fully complying with the law protecting VA employees and not only ensure no further illegal layoffs happen under your watch, but also work to get workers who have already been fired their jobs back with backpay?

Response: If confirmed, I will review the relevant policies and ensure that VA adheres to all applicable laws.

- 7) Will you commit to advising and consulting with this committee's membership before any future layoffs or reductions in force?

Response: If confirmed, I will work to maintain open communications with Congress.

- 8) Will you commit to bargaining with your employees' unions and listening to their voices and expertise?

Response: If confirmed, I will engage with all relevant stakeholders and ensure that VA adheres to its obligations regarding labor relations and employee engagement.

- 9) The VA claimed that the firing of over 1,000 probationary employees will save the VA over \$98 million per year. At the same time, the Trump administration and Republicans in Congress are proposing to give the wealthiest Americans over \$1 trillion in tax breaks. Do you believe we should be sacrificing the delivery of benefits for veterans, who put their lives on the line to defend our country, in order to make billionaires richer?

Response: If confirmed, I will ensure VA continues to provide high-quality care and benefits to veterans.

- 10) President Trump's Executive Order, *Implementing the President's "Department of Government Efficiency" Workforce Optimization Initiative*, limits the VA to hiring only one employee for every four that depart. Do you agree with this order? What will you do to ensure the VA can hire the nurses and doctors it needs to provide health care to the over 9 million veterans enrolled in VA health care? What about the workers needed to ensure timely processing and delivery of veteran benefits like mortgages, pensions, and education?

Response: If confirmed, I will review VA hiring policies and assess the best way to ensure the VA workforce meets the needs of veterans.

- 11) During his first term, President Trump fired VA Secretary David Shulkin for not moving fast enough to privatize the VA. President Trump's hiring freeze, the "Workforce Optimization Initiative," and the recent firings all point to this administration continuing to push veterans out of the VA and into the dysfunctional private health care system. In my view—and this is the view of the veterans organizations representing millions of those who put their lives on the line to defend us—we should be strengthening the VA, not dismembering it. Do you believe there are parts of the VA that should be privatized? If so, what parts?

Response: If confirmed, I will assess VA's capacity and resources to ensure veterans receive the care and benefits they have earned.

- 12) I asked Secretary Collins this in his nomination hearing, and I'd like to pose the same question regarding your opinion on VA care. In two independent assessments last year, the VA outperformed non-VA hospitals in terms of patient satisfaction and hospital quality. Just 40 percent of non-VA hospitals received a four- or five-star rating for patient satisfaction, compared to 79 percent of VA facilities. Do you acknowledge that the care provided by the VA is, in fact, largely superior—in terms of quality and patient satisfaction—than alternate private care options?

Response: If confirmed, I will review the available data on VA and non-VA care to ensure that veterans receive access to timely high-quality healthcare.

UNITED STATES SENATE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

ROOM 412 RUSSELL SENATE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20510
Telephone: (202) 224-9126

QUESTIONNAIRE
FOR PRESIDENTIAL NOMINEES

The Rules of the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs require that a Presidential nominee whose nomination is referred to the Committee submit, on a form approved by the Committee, a sworn statement concerning his or her background and financial interests, including the financial interests of the nominee's spouse and children living in the nominee's household. The Committee form is in two parts:

- (A) Information concerning the employment, education, and relevant background of the nominee, which is made public; and
- (B) Information concerning the financial and other background of the nominee, which is made public only when the Committee determines that such information bears directly on the nominee's qualifications to hold the position to which the individual is nominated.

Committee action on a nomination, including hearings or a meeting to consider a motion to recommend confirmation, shall not be initiated until at least five days after the nominee submits this form unless the Chairman, with the concurrence of the Ranking Minority Member, waives the waiting period. In order to assist the Committee in its consideration of nominations, the Committee requests that each nominee complete the attached Questionnaire for Presidential Nominees. The notarized original and any supplemental information should be delivered to:

Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States Senate
Room 412, Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Attention: Chief Clerk

Revised January 2025

PART I: ALL OF THE INFORMATION IN THIS PART WILL BE MADE PUBLIC**1. Basic Biographical Information**

Please provide the following information.

<i>Position to Which You Have Been Nominated</i>	
<u>Name of Position</u>	<u>Date of Nomination</u>
Deputy Secretary, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs	January 22, 2025

<i>Current Legal Name</i>			
<u>First Name</u>	<u>Middle Name</u>	<u>Last Name</u>	<u>Suffix</u>
Paul	Reynold	Lawrence	

<i>Addresses</i>					
<u>Residential Address</u> (do not include street address)			<u>Office Address</u> (include street address)		
			Street: n/a		
City: McLean	State: VA	Zip: 22101	City:	State:	Zip:

<i>Other Names Used</i>						
<u>First Name</u>	<u>Middle Name</u>	<u>Last Name</u>	<u>Suffix</u>	<u>Check if Maiden Name</u>	<u>Name Used From</u> (Month/Year) (Check box if estimate)	<u>Name Used To</u> (Month/Year) (Check box if estimate)
n/a					Est ☐	Est ☐
					Est ☐	Est ☐

<i>Birth Year and Place</i>	
Year of Birth (Do not include month and day)	Place of Birth
1956	Tokyo, Japan

<i>Marital Status</i>					
Check All That Describe Your Current Situation:					
Never Married	Married	Separated	Annulled	Divorced	Widowed
☐	☒	☐	☐	☐	☐

<i>Spouse's Name (current spouse only)</i>			
<u>Spouse's First Name</u>	<u>Spouse's Middle Name</u>	<u>Spouse's Last Name</u>	<u>Spouse's Suffix</u>
Ann	Purcell	Lawrence	

<i>Spouse's Other Names Used (current spouse only)</i>						
<u>First Name</u>	<u>Middle Name</u>	<u>Last Name</u>	<u>Suffix</u>	<u>Check if Maiden Name</u>	<u>Name Used From</u> (Month/Year) (Check box if estimate)	<u>Name Used To</u> (Month/Year) (Check box if estimate)
Ann	Booth	Purcell			Dec 1956 Est	Sept 1985 Est ☐
					Est ☐	Est ☐

<i>Children's Names (if over 18)</i>			
<u>First Name</u>	<u>Middle Name</u>	<u>Last Name</u>	<u>Suffix</u>
Allison	Paige	Ellis	
Gregory	James	Lawrence	

2. Education

List all post-secondary schools attended.

<u>Name of School</u>	<u>Type of School</u> (vocational/technical/trade school, college/university/military college/correspondence/distance/extension/online school)	<u>Date Began School</u> (month/year) (check box if estimate)	<u>Date Ended School</u> (month/year) (check box if estimate) (check "present" box if still in school)	<u>Degree</u>	<u>Date Awarded</u>
University of Massachusetts	University	Sept 1974 ☐ Est	May 1978 ☐ Est ☐ Present	BA Economics	May 1978
VA Tech	University	Sept 1978 ☐ Est	May 1980 ☐ Est ☐ Present	MA Economics	May 1980
VA Tech	University	Sept 1980 ☐ Est	June 1981 ☐ Est ☐ Present	Ph.D. Economics	August 1983
		☐ Est	☐ Est ☐ Present		
		☐ Est	☐ Est ☐ Present		

3. Employment

(A) List all of your employment activities, including unemployment and self-employment. If the employment activity was military duty, list separate employment activity periods to

show each change of military duty station. Do not list employment before your 18th birthday unless to provide a minimum of two years of employment history.

Type of Employment (Active Military Duty Station, National Guard/Reserve, USPHS Commissioned Corps, Other federal employment, State Government (Non-federal Employment), Self-employment, Unemployment, Federal Contractor, Non-Government Employment (excluding self-employment), Other)	Name of Your Employer/Assigned Duty Station	Most Recent Position Title/Rank	Location (City and State only)	Date Employment Began (month/year) (check box if estimate)	Date Employment Ended (month/year) (check box if estimate) "present" box if still employed)
Self-employed	Self	n/a	McLean, VA	2021 ☐ Est Jan	Est Present ☐ Dec 2024
Federal Employment	U.S. Dept of VA	Under Secretary for Benefits	Wash, DC	May 2018 ☐ Est	Jan 2021
Federal Contractor	Kaiser Associates	Vice President	Washington, DC	July 2016 ☐ Est	Est Present ☐ April 2018
Federal Contractor	Ernst & Young	Partner	McLean, VA	July 2009 ☐ Est	June 2016 ☐ Est
Federal Contractor	Accenture	Vice President	Arlington, VA	January 2008	June 2009
Federal Contractor	MITRE Corporation	Senior Director	McLean VA	March 2006	Dec 2007
Federal Contractor	Independent Consultant	N/A	McLean VA	July 2005	Feb 2006 ☐ Est
Federal Contractor	IBM	Vice President	Bethesda, MD	Oct 2002	June 2005
Federal Contractor	PricewaterhouseCoopers	Partner	Arlington, VA	Jan 1987	Sept 2002
Non-govt employment	Chase Econometrics	Sr. Economist	Phil, PA	Jan 1986	Dec 1986
Federal Contractor	Arthur D. Little	Economist	Washington, DC	August 1984	Dec 1986
Activity Duty Military	U.S. Army/Ft. Lee, VA	Captain	Ft Lee, VA	Jan 1982	July 1984
				Est ☐	Est ☐

(B) List any advisory, consultative, honorary or other part-time service or positions with federal, state, or local governments, not listed elsewhere.

<u>Name of Government Entity</u>	<u>Name of Position</u>	<u>Date Service Began</u> (month/year) (check box if estimate)	<u>Date Service Ended</u> (month/year) (check box if estimate) (check "present" box if still serving)
State of Virginia	Appointed by the Virginia General Assembly to Joint Subcommittee Studying Science and Technology in Higher Education	Est June 2007 ☐	July 2007
		Est ☐	Est Present ☐ ☐
		Est ☐	Est Present ☐ ☐

4. Honors and Awards

List all scholarships, fellowships, honorary degrees, civilian service citations, military medals, academic or professional honors, honorary society memberships and any other special recognition for outstanding service or achievement.

Phi Beta Kappa, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 1978

Captain, U.S. Army 1982-84, Meritorious Service Medal and Airborne School graduate

Board of Advisors of the Public Policy Program at William and Mary, 1997 to 2008

Top 100 Public Service Business Leader Award Judge for award in 2003 and 2005

Top 100 Public Service Business Leader Award winner in 2000, 2002, and 2019 selected by *Federal Computer Week*

Selected as Government Executive of the Year by Service to the Citizen, 2019

Board of Directors of Junior Achievement, National Capital Chapter, 1996 to 2005

Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Private Sector Council, 2003-2004

Fellow, National Academy of Public Administration, elected 2012

Department of Veteran Affairs Exceptional Service Award, January 2021

5. Memberships

List all memberships held in professional, social, business, fraternal, scholarly, civic, charitable, or other organizations in the last ten years.

Unless relevant to your nomination, you do NOT need to include memberships in charitable organizations available to the public as a result of a tax-deductible donation of \$1,000 or less, Parent-Teacher Associations, or other organizations connected to schools attended by your children, athletic clubs or teams, automobile support organizations (such as AAA), discounts clubs (such as Groupon or Sam's Club), or affinity memberships/consumer clubs (such as frequent flyer memberships).

<u>Name of Organization</u>	<u>Dates of Your Membership</u> (You may approximate)	<u>Position(s) Held</u>
Vets2Industry	April 2021 to July 2023	Board member
Search & Acquire	June 2021 to Dec 2024	Advisor
Purpose Built Family Foundation	Dec 2021 to Dec 2024	Board member
Shield of Sisters	Feb 2023 to Dec 2024	Board member

6. Political Activity

(A) Have you ever been a candidate for or been elected or appointed to a political office?

No

<u>Name of Office</u>	<u>Elected/Appointed/ Candidate Only</u>	<u>Year(s) Election Held or Appointment Made</u>	<u>Term of Service (if applicable)</u>

(B) List any offices held in or services rendered to a political party or election committee during the last ten years that you have not listed elsewhere. N/A

<u>Name of Party/Election Committee</u>	<u>Office/Services Rendered</u>	<u>Responsibilities</u>	<u>Dates of Service</u>

(C) Itemize all individual political contributions of \$200 or more that you have made in the past five years to any individual, campaign organization, political party, political action committee, or similar entity. Please list each individual contribution and not the total amount contributed to the person or entity during the year.

<u>Name of Recipient</u>	<u>Amount</u>	<u>Year of Contribution</u>
Josh Quill (for Delegate in Virginia)	\$750	2023
Bill Wolf (for Delegate in Virginia)	\$250	2023
Darin Selnick (for county council in CA)	\$500	2023
Joe Kent (for Congress in Washington state)	\$200	2020
Trump for President	\$2,800	2020
Trump for President	\$3,300	2024

7. Publications

List the titles, publishers and dates of books, articles, reports or other published materials that you have written, including articles or blog posts published on the Internet.

I have written extensively on public administration issues, government management, and Veterans' issues. To the best of my knowledge, this is exhaustive list, but I can't guarantee I listed everything.

<u>Title</u>	<u>Publisher</u>	<u>Date(s) of Publication</u>
<u>Veterans Benefits for You: Get What You Deserve</u>	Humanix Books	May 2023
5 Often-Overlooked Veterans Benefits	Bottom Line	April 25, 2023
The Veterans Benefits Administration is a Good Candidate for Tailored Reforms	Government Executive	April 4, 2023
Making the Case for a Federal Management Corps	Government Executive	April 1, 2022
Helping production agencies Deliver	Nextgov.com	June 20, 2023
<u>Transforming Service to Veterans: How I Pursued Performance Excellence at the Veterans Benefits Administration</u>	Amazon	September 2021
<u>Succeeding as a Political Executive: 50 Insights from Experience</u> , with Mark Abramson	Rowman & Littlefield	2016
<u>What Government Does: How Political Executives Manage</u> , with Mark Abramson	Rowman & Littlefield	2014
<u>Paths to Making a Difference: Leading in Government</u> , with Mark Abramson	Rowman & Littlefield	2013
<u>Paths to Making a Difference: Leading in Government</u> , with Mark Abramson	Rowman & Littlefield	2011
<u>Learning the Ropes: Lessons for Political Appointees</u> , with Mark Abramson	Rowman & Littlefield	2005
<u>Transforming Organizations</u> , with Mark Abramson	Rowman & Littlefield	2001
<u>Unsportsmanlike Conduct: the NCAA and the Business of College Football</u>	Praeger Press	1987

<u>"What Political Appointees Need to Know: Preparing Appointees for Success"</u>	Political Appointee Project Website	December 20, 2016
<u>"How To Be Successful in the Trump Administration: Four Lessons From Previous Political Appointees"</u>	Government Executive Website	December 16, 2016
<u>"What the State Department Can Teach Agencies About Preparing New Appointees for the Job"</u>	Government Executive Website	December 14, 2016
<u>"Needed: A New Approach for Onboarding Political Appointees"</u>	Government Executive Website	December 2, 2016
<u>"Your Guide to a Presidential Appointment in the Next Administration"</u>	Government Executive Website	June 28, 2016
<u>"Avoiding a Government of Lawyers and Former Congressional Staffers"</u>	Government Executive Website	May 26, 2016
<u>"Do You Have What It Takes To Be a Political Appointee?"</u>	Government Executive Website	May 2, 2016
<u>"Looking Close to Home"</u>	Political Appointee Project	January 2015
<u>"Leon Panetta's Hard Lessons in Leadership"</u>	Government Executive	October 24, 2014
<u>"Hillary Clinton's Lessons in Executive Diplomacy"</u>	Government Executive	July 21, 2014
<u>"What Government Executives Can Learn from Robert Gates"</u>	Government Executive	June 20, 2014
<u>"What Government Executives Can Learn from Tim Geithner"</u>	Government Executive	June 12, 2014
<u>"The Challenge of Appointments"</u>	Federal Times	May 2, 2014
<u>"Implementing Performance Management in Government: Advice for Political Appointees"</u>	Political Appointee Project	April 2014
<u>"Looking Close to Home"</u>	Political Appointee Project	February 2014
<u>"Five lessons for Second-term Political Appointees"</u>	Federal Times	January 2013
<u>"What Every New Political Appointee Should Know"</u>	Political Appointee Project	January 2013

<u>"What We Have Learned About Political Appointees"</u>	Political Appointee Project	October 2012
<u>"How Federal Executives Build Successful Long-Term Organizations"</u>	Public Manager	Summer 2012
<u>"The Many Dimensions of innovation in Government"</u>	AOL Government	May 2012
<u>"Innovation in Government: Creating the Race to the Top Program at Education"</u>	AOL Government	April 2012
<u>"Innovation in Government: Creating the VA's Innovation Initiative"</u>	AOL Government	April 2012
<u>"Innovation in Government: Creating The 'Know Your Farmer' Program"</u>	AOL Government	March 2012
<u>"Innovation in Government: Creating The 'Every Day Counts' Program"</u>	AOL Government	March 2012
<u>"Leadership Lessons: Inez Moore Tenenbaum, Consumer Product Safety Commission"</u>	Government Executive	February 2012
<u>"Leadership Lessons: Patrick Gallagher, National Institute of Standards and Technology"</u>	Government Executive	January 2012
<u>"Leadership Lessons: Joseph Main, Mine Safety and Health Administration"</u>	Government Executive	January 23, 2012
<u>"Leadership Lessons: Arun Majumdar, Advanced Research Projects Agency-Energy"</u>	Government Executive	January 17, 2012
<u>"Leadership Lessons: David Kappos, U.S. Patent and Trademark Office"</u>	Government Executive	January 2012
<u>"The Challenge of Selecting and Orienting Political Appointees"</u>	The Public Manager	Winter 2011
<u>"VIEWPOINT Picking Appointees"</u>	Government Executive	October 2011
<u>"Agency-Level Reorganization Can Work"..</u>	The Public Manager	Summer 2011
<u>"Analysis: Getting Appointees Up to Speed"</u>	Government Executive	February 17, 2010
<u>"Ready Aim Aim Aim: The Government's Culture Clash"</u>	Federal Times	December 15, 2009

<u>"Commentary: Quarterly reports would enhance performance, accountability"</u>	Federal Times	December 21, 2008
<u>"Missing From The Presidential Debate: Federal Management"</u>	Federal Times	October 13, 2008
"How to Think Like a Sports GM"	Federal Computer Week	September 15, 2008
"Viewpoint Across the Divide"	Government Executive	August 1, 2008
<u>"Commentary: Next administration should let agencies lead reform."</u>	Federal Times	July 27, 2008
<u>"The challenge of managing a highly educated work force."</u>	Federal Times	August 19, 2005
<u>"Public Service at Its Best."</u>	The Business of Government	Spring 2005
<u>"What Steve Spurrier Taught Me About Management."</u>	The Business of Government	Summer 2004
"Grant Giving."	The Business of Government	Summer 2003
"Documenting a Revolution: Studies Detail Exciting Changes in Government,"	Federal Times	March 10, 2003
<u>"Leadership."</u>	The Business of Government	Winter 2002
"Benchmarking."	The Business of Government	Fall 2001
<u>"E-Government."</u>	The Business of Government	Fall 2000
<u>"Chief Financial Officers Act of 1990."</u>	The Business of Government	Spring 2000
<u>"Management Challenges for the 21st Century."</u>	The Business of Government	Summer 1999
<u>"Transforming a Traditional Agency into a Business: The United States Mint."</u>	The Business of Government	Spring 1999
<u>"Gilmore gets B+ on technology."</u>	Washington Business Journal	December 7, 1998

<u>"Washington, D.C., A City of Policies and Operations."</u>	The Business of Government	September/October 1998
<u>"Mergers;" "Improving the Business of Government - U.S. Investigations Services;" "Public-Private Partnership at Work."</u>	The Business of Government	July/August 1998
"E-Government;" "Improving the Business of Government - Office of Management and Budget."	The Business of Government	May/June 1998
<u>"Strategic Alliances;" "Improving the Business of Government - Defense Commissary Agency."</u>	The Business of Government	March/April 1998
"Let's Solve High-Tech Labor Shortage Ourselves."	Washington Business Journal	March 13-19, 1998
<u>"Learning from Private Sector;" "Improving the Business of Government - Defense Automated Printing Service."</u>	The Business of Government	January/February 1998

"Build Statewide Information Superhighway."	Washington Business Journal	January 2-8, 1998
"Tech issue missing in Va. race."	Washington Business Journal	October 27, 1997
<u>"Commit to specifics on outcomes, innovations."</u>	Washington Business Journal	September 8, 1997
"Leveling the NCAA Field." ,	Athletic Business	October 1989
"End Cheating - Pay College Athletes."	The Wall Street Journal	March 6, 1987, page 30
"Certification of Personnel Administrators: An Alternative Interpretation."	Personnel Administration	December 1980
"Marx on Regulation: A Comment."	Review of Social Economy	April 1980

8. Public Statements

I have been providing information and ideas in the different formats described in this question. I have provided what I believe is an exhaustive list. However, I can't guarantee all of my work is listed.

(A) List any testimony, official statements or other communications, including those made on the Internet including on social media or other digital content sites, relating to matters of public policy that you have issued or provided or that others presented on your behalf to public bodies or officials.

The social media platforms I have used are X, LinkedIn, and Youtube

I'm on X (twitter) - @PaulRLawrence, though I am not very active on that platform.

My primary social media is LinkedIn - <https://www.linkedin.com/in/drpaullawrence/>. While serving as Under Secretary for Benefits (May 2018 to Jan 2021), I used this platform to present information about VBA and Veterans benefits.

From February 2021 through late December 2024, I used this platform to post articles and videos about Veteran issues.

I have a Youtube channel, where I stored old videos - https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC_TA-70W4jCLnIIIb1CtxSA

(B) List any speeches or talks delivered by you, including commencement speeches, remarks, lectures, panel discussions, conferences, political speeches, and question-and-answer sessions. Include the dates and places where such speeches or talks were given.

Presentation to the Annual Meeting of the National Academy of Public Administration Nov 2011 (Washington DC)

Facilitated a Panel discussion at the National Academy of Public Administration May 2016 (Washington DC)

Keynote address to summer meeting of the Association of Military Banks of America – August 2023 (Philadelphia, PA)

Remarks at Spring luncheon of the Association of Military Banks of America – May 2022 (Arlington, VA)

While serving as Under Secretary of Benefits, I regularly gave presentations to the annual and the winter meetings of the American Legion, DAV, VFW, and the National Association of State Department of Veteran Affairs. In June 2018, I spoke to the annual meeting of the National Association of County Veteran Service Officers

(C) List all interviews you have given to newspapers, magazines or other publications, and radio or television stations (including the dates of such interviews).

I have regularly appeared on television and radio. To the best of my recollection and record keeping, this is an exhaustive list, but I may have missed some.

Television

In late July and early August 2023, I appeared on Newsmax TV about 10 times talking about Veterans Benefits and my book, Veterans Benefits for You.

I have also appeared on their shows – Wake up America and Carl Higbie Frontline

Radio

In July and August 2023, I appeared on about a dozen talk radio shows speaking about my book – Veterans Benefits for You.

Radio appearances in 2024

- August 19 – Kurth & Anthony Show, WVMT Burlington & Pittsburgh, PA
- August 29 – The Simon Conway Show, Des Moines, IA
- September 3 – The Bill Martinez Show, Nationally Syndicated
- September 4 – The Steve Gruber Show, Statewide Michigan syndication
- September 9 – The Alan Nathan Show, Nationally Syndicated
- September 9 – Conservative Commandos – George Landreth and Rick Trader
- September 11 – The Jimmy Lakey Show. Denver/Fort Collins, CO
- September 27 – The Alan Nation Show
- September 27 – The Lars Larsen Show, regional show and rebroadcast on his national show
- September 30 – Morning News with Gary Sutton, Southeast PA: Harrisburg, Lancaster, York
- September 30 – The Don Ochsner Show, central Minnesota
- September 30 – The Rod Arquette Show, Salt Lake City metro
- October 1 – The Steve Gruber Show (2nd appearance – See September 4)
- October 1 – Syracuse Morning News with Dave Allen, Syracuse, NY
- October 1 – The Jimmy Lakey Show

- October 2 – Wake Up Wyoming with Glenn Woods, Wyoming: Cheyenne, Casper, Laramie
- October 8 – Conservative Commandos
- October 8 – The Simon Conway Show
- October 9 – Syracuse Morning Show with Dave Allen
- October 10 – The Dan Gaffney Show, Southern Delaware
- October 10 – The Andrew Langer Show, Baltimore
- October 30 – The National Desk with Jan Jeffcoat – (Television)
- October 30 – The Dan Ochsner Show, central Minnesota
- October 30 – The Lars Larson Show, regional show and rebroadcast on his national show
- October 31 – Syracuse Morning News with Dave Allen, Syracuse, NY
- October 31 – KABC/Los Angeles, The Frank Mottek News Hour

In 2020, while serving as Under Secretary of Benefits, I was interviewed on numerous radio shows previewing the telephone town halls I conducted to keep Veterans informed of benefits and services during the pandemic. As a point of reference, I did 110 telephone town halls during 2020. Each one focused on Veterans in a particular state, so the radio interviews focused on reaching Veterans in that state.

Podcasts

I did a recurring section on the Straight to the Point podcast about Veterans Benefits. We did a show a month for about 2 years. You can find the episodes at - <https://pod.co/straight-to-the-point>

I appeared several times on the Your Next Mission Podcast discussing Veterans Benefits. You can find more at - <https://yournextmission.org/podcast/ep-9-v-a-education-benefits-with-dr-paul-r-lawrence-part-i/>

Transform your Future – Master VA Benefits & Upgrade your Career - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TXo7QEAmV8M>

Veterans & Possible Benefits, plus Back to School in 2024 - <https://www.iheart.com/podcast/1248-kentucky-focus-88859880/episode/veterans-possible-benefits-plus-back-204523764/>

Your veteran benefits – SOS podcast #151 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fqW42u9nyjM>

Transitioning Military: Career Changes & Job Resilience - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ko66usnCdnA>

Transforming Service to Veterans – Veterans Disability Lawyers podcast - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DtkF_0Oj9qk

Todd Walker, Lima's Morning News - <https://www.iheart.com/podcast/53-limas-morning-news-165815195/episode/6-13-24-paul-lawrence-veterans-benefits-185333588/>

What veterans sometimes don't know about VA could fill a book – Tom Temin Show, WFED radio - <https://federalnewsnetwork.com/veterans-affairs/2024/06/what-veterans-sometimes-dont-know-about-va-could-fill-a-book/>

The Plethora of Benefits Available for Veterans and How to Submit Claims – The Counter Culture Mom Show with Tina Griffin - <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-plethora-of-benefits-available-for-veterans-and/id1512805826?i=1000634052470>

Understanding and Navigating your Veteran Benefits – The MilVet Podcast - <https://open.spotify.com/episode/3Z61tfumBsC7q7jCkYkaBh?si=lsSevWZGSYmA30lj7EPulw&nd=1&dlsi=db8f33f470484611>

How to Get the VA Benefits you Deserve – the Scott DeLuzio Show - <https://driveonpodcast.com/podcast/how-to-get-the-va-benefits-you-deserve/>

How to Maximize Your Veterans Benefits – the Veterans Rights podcast - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rOOM8qmGUl>

Talk of the North – Episode 252 – with Nick Rhudy - <https://www.106khq.com/episode/episode-252/>

Unlock Your VA Benefits – Veteran S.O.S. podcast - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZRf1aPoMJ9k>

Veterans Benefits 101: A Deep Dive with Paul Lawrence - <https://www.linkedin.com/events/7097962825016332288/comments/>

The Ins and Outs of Your Post 9/11 GI Bill Benefits - <https://milmo.co/podcast/your-post-9-11-gi-bill-benefits/>

Unprecedented Access podcast - <https://creators.spotify.com/pod/show/melanie-nelson0/episodes/Unprecedented-Access-e1c1u1l>

Website

I made several videos that were posted on this website - <https://veteransfortrump2024.com/>.

9. Agreements or Arrangements

x See OGE Form 278. (If, for your nomination, you have completed an OGE Form 278 Executive Branch Personnel Public Financial Disclosure Report, you may check the box here to complete this section and then proceed to the next section.)

As of the date of filing your OGE Form 278, report your agreements or arrangements for:
(1) continuing participation in an employee benefit plan (e.g. pension, 401k, deferred compensation); (2) continuation of payment by a former employer (including severance payments); (3) leaves of absence; and (4) future employment.

Provide information regarding any agreements or arrangements you have concerning (1) future employment; (2) a leave of absence during your period of Government service; (3) continuation of payments by a former employer other than the United States Government; and (4) continuing participation in an employee welfare or benefit plan maintained by a former employer other than United States Government retirement benefits.

<u>Status and Terms of Any Agreement or Arrangement</u>	<u>Parties</u>	<u>Date</u> (month/year)

10. Lobbying

Have you ever registered as a lobbyist? If so, please indicate the state, federal, or local bodies with which you have registered (e.g., House, Senate, California Secretary of State).

No

11. Testifying Before the Congress

(A) Do you agree to appear and testify before any duly constituted committee of the Congress upon the request of such Committee?

Yes

(B) Do you agree to provide such information as is requested by such a committee in a timely and accurate manner?

Yes.

Submissions for the Record

**Ranking Member Blumenthal
Submission for the Record
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
Hearing to Consider the Nomination of Paul Lawrence for Deputy Secretary of the Department of
Veterans Affairs
February 19, 2025**

Ranking Member Blumenthal's unanswered Requests For Information (RFIs) sent to the Department of Veterans Affairs between January 21, 2025 and February 18, 2025.

- 1) On January 30, 2025, Committee minority staff requested information relating to the impacts of the OMB funding freeze on veteran-serving federal grants and programs. Committee minority staff asked nine specific questions about the funding freeze's potential impacts on VA's 44 financial assistance programs, including homelessness programs, as well as regarding whether VA has collaborated with other federal agencies which run veteran-focused grant programs to analyze the impact on these programs. VA responded on January 30 by referring back to a press release and did not answer any of the Committee's specific questions. Committee minority staff informed VA that until VA provides further information, the Committee considers these questions unanswered.
- 2) On January 30, 2025, Committee minority staff followed up with VA on a January 14 request for a briefing on implementation of Section 120 of the *Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act* – a critical provision of this bill which will increase the expenditure cap for spending on noninstitutional long-term care for veterans. VA responded on January 31 that they had sent a reminder to VHA to provide dates and times for such briefing. As of February 18, no such briefing has been scheduled.
- 3) On January 31, 2025, Committee minority staff requested information relating to the impact of Executive Order 14182 on VA operations, and whether any guidance had gone out to VA health care staff regarding abortion care. VA provided a one-sentence response on February 3 that no guidance had gone out regarding the Hyde Amendment. Committee minority staff responded on February 3 to specify the questions were not asking about the Hyde Amendment (which has never applied to VA), and asked VA to provide updated responses. VA stated on February 13 that they would circle back at a later date.
- 4) On Jan 31, 2025, Committee minority staff requested information related to survivor benefits, including data related to survivors receiving Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC), new survivor benefits claims, impacts of the current hiring freeze and other executive actions on the number of VBA staff processing claims for survivor benefits, the number of offers rescinded or positions canceled in the Office of Survivor Assistance, and data on average VBA timelines for processing survivor benefits. As of February 18, VA has not responded.
- 5) On January 31, 2025, Committee minority staff requested the exit memo of the former Under Secretary for Benefits after President Trump announced a hiring freeze impacting the Veterans Benefits Administration. As of February 18, VA has not responded.
- 6) On February 3, 2025, Committee minority staff requested information regarding VA's implementation of the Office of Personnel Management's memo and policies regarding their Fork in the Road deferred resignation program offer. Committee staff sent 19 questions regarding eligibility, funding, legal authorities, impact on remaining staff and workload, and general data regarding responses to this offer. As of February 18, VA has not responded.

- 7) On February 3, 2025, Committee minority staff requested information regarding VA's memorandum entitled "Temporary Review of Certain Department of Veterans Affairs Communications and Travel" (VIEWS 12680106) issued January 22, 2025, and all subsequent related executive orders, announcements, memoranda, policies and guidance. Committee staff sent four questions requesting clarification regarding impact and implementation of this guidance including pre-existing coordination between the Department and other organizations working to house homeless veterans, suicide prevention trainings provided by the Department to the public, and other trainings provided by the Department to community care providers, VA grant recipients, and others. As of February 18, the Committee has not received a response beyond an acknowledgement of receipt after requesting one on February 8.
- 8) On February 3, 2025, Committee minority staff requested information regarding VA's implementation of President Trump's action and announcement entitled "Hiring Freeze" issued January 20, 2025, and all subsequent related executive orders, announcements, memoranda, policies and guidance. Committee staff sent 17 questions regarding exemptions, unfilled positions, offers rescinded, and overall impacts on veterans' access to care and benefits. As of February 18, 2025, the Committee has not received a response beyond an acknowledgement of receipt after requesting one on February 8.
- 9) On February 3, 2025, Committee minority staff requested information regarding VA's implementation of President Trump's action and announcement entitled "Return to In-Person Work" issued January 20, 2025, and all subsequent related executive orders, announcements, memoranda, policies and guidance. Committee staff sent six questions requesting copies of guidance and general information regarding existing telework and remote work staff data, space and funding demands associated with implementation, and any exemptions requested by the Department. As of February 18, 2025, the Committee has not received a response beyond an acknowledgement of receipt after requesting one on February 8.
- 10) On February 3, 2025, Committee minority staff requested information regarding VA's implementation of President Trump's action and announcement entitled "Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing" issued January 20, 2025, and all subsequent related executive orders, announcements, memoranda, policies and guidance. Committee staff sent 17 questions regarding impacts on accessibility, contracting, veteran preference, and overall implementation. As of February 18, 2025, the Committee has not received a response beyond an acknowledgement of receipt after requesting one on February 8.
- 11) On February 3, 2025, Committee minority staff requested information regarding VA's implementation the Office of Personnel Management's memo regarding probationary periods and administrative leave issued on January 20, 2025. Committee staff sent three questions as of February 18, 2025, the Committee has not received a response to this request beyond acknowledgement of receipt, despite the Department having taken action related to this memo and RFI, including firing more than 1,000 probationary employees on February 13.
- 12) On February 3, 2025, Committee minority staff requested information regarding VA's implementation of President Trump's action titled "Restoring Accountability to Policy-Influencing Positions within the Federal Workforce" issued on January 20, 2025. Committee staff sent six questions and as of February 18, 2025, the Committee has not received a response to this request beyond acknowledgement of receipt after requesting one on February 8.

- 13) On February 5, 2025, Committee minority staff request information related to the VetSuccess on Campus program, including the list of schools on the wait list for the program along with the number of individuals using VA education benefits at each school; and requested a brief on implementation of the Native VetSuccess at Tribal Colleges and Universities Pilot Program authorized in the FY2023 Appropriations Act. As of February 18, VA has not responded or scheduled the brief.
- 14) On February 7, 2025, VA notified Committee staff that the Caregiver Support Line hours would be cut. Minority committee staff immediately requested a briefing within 14 days about this action and submitted requests for additional detail including call volume data, call center staffing and vacancy rate, including how recent Administration actions affected call center staffing, and any other information relevant to the decision to cut call center hours. As of February 18, VA has not responded to the questions and has not contacted Committee staff to schedule this brief.
- 15) On February 10, 2025, Committee minority staff requested information regarding VA's human resources information technology systems after multiple reports that even positions exempt from President Trump's hiring freeze were not moving forward in the hiring process due to blocks in the information technology systems set by Office of Personnel Management. As of February 18, the Committee has not received a response.
- 16) On February 11, 2025, Committee minority staff requested a call from VA to discuss the current status of the Puerto Rico State Veterans Home. VA received this request, but has not yet provided a date or time for such a call – despite Committee minority staff's request that this call take place before the end of February due to its urgent nature.
- 17) On February 11, 2025, Committee minority staff requested the Board of Veterans Appeals' plan to implement the Trump Administration return to office mandate. Committee minority staff asked for budgetary impact of revoking remote work contracts and acquiring the capital infrastructure needed to comply with the mandate. Committee staff was informed that a response could be expected within a week. As of February 18, there has been no response.
- 18) On February 11, 2025, Committee minority staff requested information on Secretary Collins being tapped as interim head of the Office of Government Ethics (OGE) and the Office of Special Counsel (OSC), after President Trump fired each agency's Senate-confirmed, non-partisan leader. VA directed Committee staff questions to the White House for further information. Committee minority staff followed up the same day with VA to ask about Secretary Collins' role as Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs and whether or not he will spend official hours carrying out non-VA related duties at OSC and OGE. On February 18, 2025, Committee minority staff sent VA a follow up question asking whether Secretary Collins was still the acting head of OSC and OGE. No response has been received as of February 18, 2025.
- 19) On February 12, 2025, Committee minority staff submitted a series of questions related to the Department's delay in issuing the second-generation contracts for the Community Care Network. As of February 18, VA has neither responded nor acknowledged receipt of the request.
- 20) On February 12, 2025, Committee minority staff requested a briefing on the back of the Secretary's letter about delays in issuing the second-generation contracts for the Community Care Network. As of February 18, VA has not set a date for a briefing.

- 21) On February 12, 2025, Committee minority staff asked VA to provide the name or names of the DOGE representatives currently working at or assigned to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs as well as what date that individual or individuals first began their time at VA, whether virtual/remote or in person. On February 18, 2025, when VA had still provided no response, Committee minority staff requested an answer to the initial question and asked eight additional follow up questions regarding the DOGE agents' activities at VA. No response has been received as of February 18, 2025.
- 22) On February 13, 2025 Committee minority staff requested a census of all vacancies at the Veterans Benefits Administration. As of February 18, VA has not responded.

**Ranking Member Blumenthal
Submission for the Record
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
Hearing to Consider the Nomination of Paul Lawrence for Deputy Secretary of the Department of
Veterans Affairs
February 19, 2025**

Ranking Member Blumenthal's unanswered letters sent to the Trump Administration regarding the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) between January 21, 2025, and February 19, 2025.

- January 23, 2025: Ranking Member Blumenthal letter to President Trump expressing concerns with the hiring freeze and calling for a full and immediate exemption for VA. *With Senators Baldwin, Booker, Cortez Masto, Duckworth, Durbin, Gallego, Hassan, Heinrich, Hirono, Kaine, Kelly, King, Klobuchar, Lujan, Merkley, Murray, Ossoff, Padilla, Reed, Rosen, Sanders, Shaheen, Slotkin, Smith, Warner, Welch and Whitehouse.*
- January 31, 2025: Ranking Member Blumenthal letter to President Trump calling for reinstatement of VA Inspector General Mike Missal, and expressing concerns with the legality of his firing and its negative impact on veterans and taxpayers. *With Senators Duckworth, Gallego, Hassan, Hirono, King, Murray, Sanders and Slotkin.*
- February 4, 2025: Ranking Member Blumenthal letter to Secretary Collins calling on him to stand up for veterans on day one against the President's harmful executive actions, including: exempting all VA positions from the hiring freeze; working with other federal agencies to ensure financial assistance programs for veterans are exempted from the funding freeze; working with President Trump to re-appoint Mike Missal as the VA Inspector General; and working with OPM and others to address directives that only serve to remove due process and employment rights from public servants.
- February 5, 2025: Ranking Member Blumenthal letter to President Trump condemning his directive to dismantle programs aimed at making VA more accessible to all veterans, and calling on him to rescind that order. *With Senators Duckworth, Hirono and Murray.*
- February 6, 2025: Ranking Member Blumenthal letter to Secretary Collins calling on him to immediately secure any personal and related information regarding veterans provided to Elon Musk and DOGE associates; deny and sever their access to any VA or other government system that includes information about veterans; and require them to immediately and permanently delete any information in their possession. *With Senators Baldwin, Bennet, Cortez Masto, Duckworth, Durbin, Heinrich, Kaine, Kelly, King, Lujan, Markey, Merkley, Murphy, Murray, Reed, Rosen, Sanders, Schumer, Shaheen, Smith, Van Hollen, Warner, Warnock, Warren and Wyden.*
- February 7, 2025: Ranking Member Blumenthal letter to Secretary Collins expressing concerns with the legality of the OPM "Fork in the Road" emails to federal employee, and the negative impact it could have on the delivery of care to veterans. It also asks for detailed information on the legal justification of the offer; its impacts on existing staff shortages; the estimated costs of this effort and how it will be paid; and the initial numbers of VA employees who have accepted buyout offers. *With Ranking Member Takano.*
- February 10, 2025: Ranking Member Blumenthal letter to Secretary Collins urging him to maintain existing telework and remote work arrangements that have proven integral to the Board of Veterans' Appeals historic strides in managing its caseload. *With Ranking Member Takano.*



January 23, 2025

The Honorable Donald J. Trump
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Trump,

We write with urgent concerns about the Presidential Memorandum issued on January 20, 2025, which instituted an immediate hiring freeze, with few exceptions, across the federal civil service. Veterans have earned and deserve the best quality health care and benefits possible. Delivering on that sacred promise starts with ensuring the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has the appropriate personnel in place to serve them. As written, this Memorandum could dramatically impair the ability of veterans across the country to get the care and benefits they desperately need. It could also delay or deny various other services across VA – from burial services to job training to assistance for homeless veterans to life-saving assistance from the Veterans Crisis Line. That is why it is imperative for you provide an immediate, clear, and full exemption to this hiring freeze for VA so it can continue to deliver on its sacred mission for veterans.

In your Memorandum, little detail is provided to understand the scope of its exemptions. And despite assurances that VA benefits would be exempt, we have become aware the hiring freeze will extend to the Veterans Benefits Administration – a decision that will dramatically impact the processing of disability claims, growing the backlog and making it more difficult for veterans to access their earned benefits, including those promised in the PACT Act. Additionally, there is no explicit exemption for employees serving the more than 9.2 million veterans enrolled in VA health care.

Veterans deserve the best care possible from the best medical professionals in the country. To deliver on that obligation, VA continues to utilize various hiring authorities and incentives provided by Congress to address chronic medical workforce shortages, particularly in rural areas. Instead of building upon those efforts, one of your first actions was to stop them entirely, and to issue new directives to VA personnel across the country to not only leave vacancies unaddressed, but to revoke job offers that have already been made. That betrays trust with veterans on day one of your Administration, and betrays trust with prospective VA employees intent on serving veterans – an action that will undoubtedly have long-term impacts on VA's ability to effectively recruit and retain the physicians, nurses, and other critical positions that make VA the preferred option for care for veterans.

Mr. President, to prevent the delay or denial of life-saving services and benefits for our nation's heroes, we urge you to provide an immediate, clear, and full exemption to VA personnel from your hiring freeze. Thanks largely to the PACT Act and the leadership of the Biden Administration, VA is providing more care and more benefits to more veterans than at any time in its history. We are hopeful to work with you to build upon our nation's promise to these men and women, but we also vow to fight every effort that dishonors their service and reneges upon that sacred promise.

Sincerely,



RICHARD BLUMENTHAL
United States Senator



MAZIE K. HIRONO
United States Senator



CATHERINE CORTEZ MASTO
United States Senator



MARTIN HEINRICH
United States Senator



MARK R. WARNER
United States Senator



JACK REED
United States Senator



BERNARD SANDERS
United States Senator



JEFFREY A. MERKLEY
United States Senator



TINA SMITH
United States Senator



RICHARD J. DURBIN
United States Senator



MARGARET WOOD HASSAN
United States Senator



PATTY MURRAY
United States Senator



JON OSSOFF
United States Senator



TIM KAINE
United States Senator



BEN RAY LUJAN
United States Senator



CORY A. BOOKER
United States Senator



MARK KELLY
United States Senator



RUBEN GALLEGO
United States Senator



ALEX PADILLA
United States Senator



JEANNE SHAHEEN
United States Senator



TAMMY BALDWIN
United States Senator



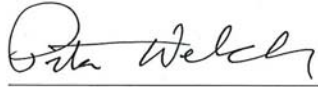
SHELDON WHITEHOUSE
United States Senator



JACKY ROSEN
United States Senator



AMY KLOBUCHAR
United States Senator

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Peter Welch". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "P" and a long, sweeping underline.

PETER WELCH
United States Senator

JERRY MORAN, KANSAS
CHAIRMAN
JOHN BOOZMAN, ARKANSAS
BILL CASSIDY, LOUISIANA
THOM TILLIS, NORTH CAROLINA
DAN SULLIVAN, ALASKA
MARSHA BLACKBURN, TENNESSEE
KEVIN CRAMER, NORTH DAKOTA
TOMMY TUBERVILLE, ALABAMA
JIM BANCOS, INDIANA
TIM SHEEHY, MONTANA
DAVID SHEARMAN, STAFF DIRECTOR

United States Senate
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

RICHARD BLUMENTHAL, CONNECTICUT
RANKING MEMBER
PATTY MURRAY, WASHINGTON
BERNARD SANDERS, VERMONT
MADEE K. HIRONO, HAWAII
MAGGIE HASSAN, NEW HAMPSHIRE
ANGUS S. KING, JR., MAINE
TAMMY DUCKWORTH, ILLINOIS
RUBEN GALLEGO, ARIZONA
ELISSA SUTTON, MICHIGAN
TONY MCCLAIN, STAFF DIRECTOR

January 31, 2025

The Honorable Donald J. Trump
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Trump,

We request that the Office of Presidential Personnel be directed to reverse its action removing the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Inspector General, Michael J. Missal. We believe this action, done without the statutorily-required 30-day notice or substantive justification to Congress, will undermine the bipartisan work carried out by Congress, particularly the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs. It will also sideline a tireless and non-partisan partner who has served as an effective check on waste, fraud, and abuse across multiple Administrations on behalf of our nation's veterans.

Veterans deserve for VA to be held accountable to meet the highest standards of efficiency and integrity in health care, benefits, and all the services it provides. That is why we have so strongly supported the important work of the independent, non-partisan, Office of Inspector General (OIG) at VA. The OIG serves a critical function of monitoring VA programs and highlighting areas in need of Executive Branch and congressional action while partnering with federal law enforcement entities to hold accountable those who attempt to or have harmed veterans or defraud the taxpayer. Over the last eight years, under the leadership of Mr. Missal, OIG oversight has identified \$37.6 billion, including \$1.5 billion in 2023, in savings, cost avoidance, and questionable costs. These efforts have saved taxpayer dollars; cracked down on waste, fraud, and abuse; and improved government efficiency. We believe these are priorities you share with us.

As legislators who have long worked on oversight of VA programs so they deliver for veterans, we have seen and partnered with VA OIG under Mr. Missal's leadership in its reviews of VA operations, facilities, and programs in a non-partisan, balanced, and thorough manner regardless of who was in the White House or in control of Congress. In our states, and states across the country, VA OIG's reports and investigations have resulted in improvements in quality of care and safety for veterans, increased compliance with laws passed by Congress, and identification of needed reforms across VA.

We again ask that you direct your Office of Presidential Personnel to reverse this decision, so the VA OIG can continue to perform its critical functions for veterans and taxpayers.

Sincerely,


RICHARD BLUMENTHAL
United States Senator


PATTY MURRAY
United States Senator


 BERNARD SANDERS
 United States Senator


 MAZIE K. HIRONO
 United States Senator


 MARGARET WOOD HASSAN
 United States Senator


 ANGUS S. KING, JR.
 United States Senator


 TAMMY DUCKWORTH
 United States Senator


 RUBEN GALLEGO
 United States Senator


 ELISSA SLOTKIN
 United States Senator

JERRY MORAN, KANSAS
CHAIRMAN
JOHN BOOZMAN, ARKANSAS
BILL CASSIDY, LOUISIANA
THOM TILLIS, NORTH CAROLINA
DAN SULLIVAN, ALASKA
MARSHA BLACKBURN, TENNESSEE
KEVIN Cramer, NORTH DAKOTA
TOMMY TUBERVILLE, ALABAMA
JIM BANCOS, INDIANA
TIM SHEEHY, MONTANA
DAVID SHEARMAN, STAFF DIRECTOR

United States Senate
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

RICHARD BLUMENTHAL, CONNECTICUT
RANKING MEMBER
PATTY MURRAY, WASHINGTON
BERNARD SANDERS, VERMONT
MADEE K. HIRONO, HAWAII
MAGGIE HASSAN, NEW HAMPSHIRE
ANGUS S. KING, JR., MAINE
TAMMY DUCKWORTH, ILLINOIS
RUBEN GALLEGO, ARIZONA
ELISSA SLUTSKIN, MICHIGAN
TONY MCCLAIN, STAFF DIRECTOR

February 4, 2025

The Honorable Doug Collins
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Collins,

Congratulations on your confirmation as Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Having a Senate-confirmed leader in this role helps ensure VA is held accountable to deliver on its sacred obligation – to deliver the quality of health care and level of benefits our nation's veterans have earned. As Ranking Member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, I plan to hold you accountable for the assurances you made throughout your confirmation process. Together, we can accomplish a great deal on our shared priorities, and build upon the many bipartisan accomplishments achieved on behalf of veterans in recent years. However, your success as Secretary, as well as your credibility, will be largely determined by the initial actions you take upon assuming your new office.

During your confirmation hearing, I asked whether you would defend veterans and oppose outside efforts harmful to them and their families. You responded you would always "put the veteran first" and pledged not to "balance budgets on the back of veterans' benefits." I strongly believe veterans and VA need a leader who will keep the needs of veterans at the forefront, particularly in the face of pressure to scale back, cut costs, and pursue harmful policies that negatively impact veterans. I, therefore, appreciated your commitment to being this kind of advocate. But over the past two weeks, we have seen an unprecedented number of dangerous and unlawful actions from the White House that will decrease access to care for veterans across the country, delay delivery of recently-expanded benefits for toxic-exposed veterans and their families, and disrupt a wide array of critical services and opportunities they rely upon. This deluge of harmful actions is a betrayal of trust for veterans, and must be reversed quickly and unequivocally.

Today is your opportunity to make good on the assurances given during your confirmation hearing – to stand up for veterans in strong opposition to these arbitrary and harmful directives and to put veterans first. In the very first test of your leadership, I urge you to take the following actions without delay:

1. Exempt all VA positions from President Trump's hiring freeze.
2. Work with other federal agencies to ensure financial assistance programs for veterans are exempted from President Trump's funding freeze.
3. Work with President Trump to re-appoint Mr. Mike Missal as the VA Inspector General.
4. Ensure and clarify to veterans, CHAMPVA beneficiaries, and VA providers that Executive Order 14182, "Enforcing the Hyde Amendment," does not apply to any of VA's operations.

5. Work with the Office of Personnel Management, and any other relevant parties, to address directives that only serve to remove due process and employment rights from public servants, and specifically:
 - a. rescind the delayed resignation offer from all VA employees,
 - b. cease and retract any atypical reviews and adverse actions against probationary employees initiated without cause, and
 - c. bar all VA positions from the new excepted service "policy/career" category, all of which exist solely to remove their due process and employment rights as public servants.
6. Rescind correspondence sent to VA employees threatening disciplinary action against those who do not inform on fellow employees regarding potential violations of President Trump's crackdown on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility programs and staff.
7. Fully restrict, block, or remove Department of Government Efficiency employee access to all VA data systems and records, including those holding veterans' private health, benefits, and related financial information, and VA employee personnel files.
8. Communicate clearly and comprehensively to all veterans and VA employees about the actions you will be taking to address #1-7 above.

Without immediate and decisive action, veterans will suffer from severed access to critical grant programs, a lack of oversight, and a politicized, divided, and depleted VA workforce. During your nomination hearing, you stated, "if I am confirmed by this body, the VA will be my mission. It'll be the mission to take care of our veterans and to make sure they get the benefits that they deserve." Today, I call on you to put those words into action, to rise to this challenge, and to immediately and strongly push back against President Trump's destructive actions that have undermined VA's mission and made it more difficult for our nation to fulfill its sacred obligation to veterans and their families who have already sacrificed on its behalf.

Sincerely,



Richard Blumenthal
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs



February 5, 2025

The Honorable Donald J. Trump
 President of the United States
 The White House
 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
 Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Trump,

We write today to condemn your January 20, 2025, Executive Order (EO) – entitled “Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing” – and its implementation at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). This EO, issued on the same day as the commemoration of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., will dismantle integral VA programs serving an increasingly diverse veteran population and terminate dedicated VA employees passionate about serving America’s veterans and their families. We have a sacred obligation to serve all veterans – no matter their background. Any effort to do otherwise reneges on the promises we have made to veterans generation after generation.

The VA programs which you describe as “radical” and “wasteful” have in fact allowed VA to bolster its PACT Act outreach to rural communities, minority veterans, and women veterans; translate PACT Act fact sheets into over a dozen languages; improve care and benefits for veterans residing outside of the continental United States; implement VA health care quality improvement projects focused on equity; ensure VA is accessible for all individuals with disabilities; and increase contract awards to women owned small businesses and small disadvantaged businesses. It is completely unacceptable that the broad language in this EO leaves the door open for these critical initiatives and more to be abruptly terminated, and calls on VA personnel to report fellow veteran-serving employees who “disguise these programs.”

Serving our nation’s veterans means serving a population with extremely diverse needs – from Native veterans requiring information on how to use their VA health care in conjunction with the Indian Health Service, to blind veterans requiring accessible VA websites, to the growing population of women veteran small business owners who benefit from increased outreach from VA about economic opportunities. Terminating these programs will not only be a failure in ensuring all veterans’ unique needs and circumstances are being met, but will also result in the termination of a large number of veterans who proudly serve their fellow veterans as VA employees. We urge you to immediately rescind this memo, and prove to our nation’s veterans that their diverse needs and identities do not go unnoticed.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Richard Blumenthal".

RICHARD BLUMENTHAL
 United States Senator

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Patty Murray".

PATTY MURRAY
 United States Senator

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mazie K. Hirono".

MAZIE K. HIRONO
 United States Senator

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Tammy Duckworth".

TAMMY DUCKWORTH
 United States Senator

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 6, 2025

The Honorable Doug Collins
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Collins,

Among many tasks, the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is entrusted with safeguarding the private and sensitive information of millions of veterans. Today, we call on you to immediately secure any personal and related information regarding veterans provided by VA or other agencies to Elon Musk and associates under the auspices of the "Department of Government Efficiency" established under Executive Order 14158. Further, we call on you to deny and sever their access to any VA or other government system that includes information about veterans, and to require them to immediately and permanently delete any information in their possession. Veterans risked their lives to defend our country, and they deserve better than to have an unelected billionaire reviewing their medical records, targeting the benefits they have earned, or using their private information for personal gain.

Our nation's veterans have entrusted their health records, including genetic samples, disability data, bank information, and other private information, to VA. The Department also stores sensitive veteran casework, files of whistleblowers who have come forward with concerns about waste, fraud, and abuse, and sensitive investigative files with veteran and federal employee information. Veterans and VA employees entrusted the Department with this information with the understanding that it would be kept private and only used to help deliver the highest quality of services to veterans, their families, and survivors.

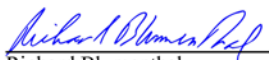
Meanwhile, the President has given unfettered access to federal databases and systems to Mr. Musk, an unelected citizen, and a team of colleagues with no formal documented employment agreement with the U.S. government. It is a group of private citizens with no experience in the federal government, who lack proper approval from legal and agency authorities, lack the appropriate security clearances, and lack the requisite background investigations or ethical conflict requirements. We are outraged these unelected, unvetted, and unaccountable individuals now have access to sensitive information that has been heavily secured for decades and by Administrations of both parties.

These actions are in direct violation of federal laws meant to protect our national security and the privacy of our citizens' personal information. This includes information on Social Security payments, Medicare, Medicaid, student loans, veterans' disability compensation payments, GI Bill payments, federal civil servants' personnel records, and much more. With

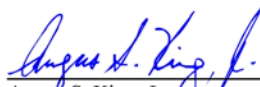
every hour, we see DOGE further expand its efforts to create a massive private database of previously guarded data outside the federal government's cyber and legal protections. It is an abhorrent and illegal overreach of executive powers, which conflicts with various federal statutes, including the Federal Information Security Modernization Act, the Privacy Act, the E-Government Act of 2002, and likely several other cyber and national security laws.

During your confirmation process, you claimed you would be focused on rooting out corruption and ensuring accountability at VA, and committed to following the laws passed by Congress. We now call on you to respond quickly and comprehensively to these privacy violations by revoking DOGE's access to VA systems and insisting they permanently remove all VA data collected from their files.

Sincerely,



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



Angus S. King, Jr.
United States Senator



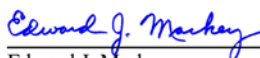
Raphael Warnock
United States Senator



Tim Kaine
United States Senator



Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



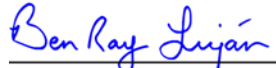
Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

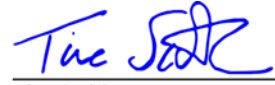


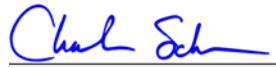
Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator


Ben Ray Lujan
United States Senator


Tina Smith
United States Senator

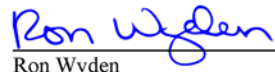

Charles E. Schumer
United States Senator


Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator


Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator

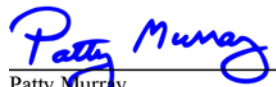

Bernard Sanders
United States Senator

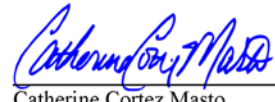

Jack Reed
United States Senator

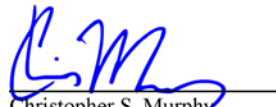

Ron Wyden
United States Senator

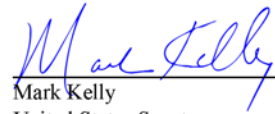

Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator

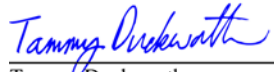

Jacky Rosen
United States Senator


Patty Murray
United States Senator

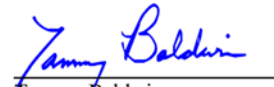

Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator


Christopher S. Murphy
United States Senator

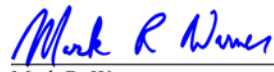

Mark Kelly
United States Senator



Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator



Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator



Mark R. Warner
United States Senator



Martin Heinrich
United States Senator

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

February 7, 2025

The Honorable Doug Collins
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Collins:

On February 3, 2025, the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees were provided a message from Acting Secretary Todd Hunter to Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) staff regarding communications from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to compensate civil servants to resign from the federal government. Specifically, in the message, he stated, "I am informing you that the offer is valid, lawful, and will be honored by VA." The message did not provide additional information to support that assertion.

To date, VA has not provided any further justification of the lawfulness of these offers, which were modeled after resignation offers sent by Elon Musk to Twitter employees in July of 2024. Mr. Musk subsequently reneged on at least \$500 million in severance payments. VA has not sought any additional authority or appropriations to support the OPM-offered deferred resignation sent to over 471,000 employees currently employed by VA. As you are undoubtedly aware, VA is operating on a Continuing Resolution, which funds the Department at Fiscal Year 2024 levels. And given that VA reported at least 40,000 vacancies as recently as last week, it appears disingenuous VA could support a mass resignation of staff that would not result in significantly reduced access to care across the country and harmful results for veterans and their families.

Therefore, we request that you provide, by close of business on **February 11, 2025**, complete and unredacted copies of the following:

1. All memoranda, analyses, documents, or other material that supports or describes the legality and validity of the deferred resignation offer and of backfilling any positions for personnel who opt-into the offer, including materials that may have been provided to VA by OPM, the Office of Management and Budget, or other executive branch entities;
2. All memoranda, analyses, documents, or other material that describes the estimated cost of paying employees not to work for several months and the funding mechanism through which these resignations will be paid, including any specific budget accounts that have been identified for this purpose;
3. All memoranda, analyses, documents, or other material that describes the occupations or positions that VA will exempt from the offer and why they are exempt;

The Honorable Doug Collins
February 7, 2025
Page 2

4. All memoranda, analyses, documents, or other material that describes the impact of this resignation offer on VA's staffing vacancies, including positions that are intended not to or unable to be filled in the near or long term, broken down by occupation, estimated cost of loss of the position, and estimated cost of fulfilling the duties of the position through outsourcing, contracts, or other means;
5. All memoranda, analyses, documents, or other material that estimates and analyzes the risk and cost of potential litigation that may arise from the use of deferred resignations; and,
6. A complete list, by occupation and geographic location, of the total number of employees who have replied to the OPM emails as of 12:00 pm Eastern Standard Time on Thursday, February 6, 2025.

All materials should be provided in a searchable format. No watermarks should be added, nor should any print functionality be disabled.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Mark Takano
Ranking Member
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs



Richard Blumenthal
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

February 10, 2025

The Honorable Doug Collins
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Mr. Secretary,

We are writing to express our deep concern regarding potential changes to the telework and remote work policies at the Board of Veterans' Appeals (BVA). The BVA plays a critical role in ensuring Veterans and their families receive the benefits they are entitled to under the law. Its mission to provide timely, fair, and impartial decisions on appeals is essential to the VA's benefits system. We strongly urge you to maintain the existing telework and remote work arrangements, which have proven integral to the Board's efficiency and success.

The BVA has made historic strides in managing its caseload, largely due to the expansion of telework and remote work policies. In Fiscal Year 2023, the Board adjudicated and dispatched a record-breaking 103,245 appeals – an 8.3% increase over FY 2022 – while also reducing the number of pending appeals for the first time in four years. This trend continued into FY 2024. As of the end of January 2025, the Board has issued 36,536 decisions this fiscal year – 3,776 ahead of last year's pace – while also conducting 6,636 hearings.

These record-breaking results are not coincidental. They reflect the efficiency gains achieved through telework and the ability to attract and retain experienced attorneys and Veterans Law Judges (VLJs). Currently, over 90 percent of VLJs and decision-writing attorneys work remotely or eligible for telework, and productivity has increased as a direct result. The quality of Board decisions has also improved for the third consecutive year, rising to 96 percent for Legacy appeals and 94 percent for AMA (Appeals Modernization Act) appeals in FY 2023.

Over the past five years, the BVA has strategically reduced its physical office footprint, cutting operational costs without compromising performance. In 2012, the Board occupied five floors at 425 I Street NW, Washington, DC. Today, it operates efficiently with just one floor, a reduction that has been facilitated entirely by telework and remote work programs. The continued success of remote and telework operations eliminates the need for costly expansion of office space and aligns with VA's broader goals of responsible resource management.

On January 20, 2025, in the Return to In-Person Work announcements, President Trump instructed "[h]eads of all departments and agencies in the executive branch" to, "as soon as practicable, take all necessary steps to terminate remote work arrangements and require employees to return to work in-person at their respective duty stations on a full-time basis, provided that the department and agency heads shall make exemptions they deem necessary."

Secretary Doug Collins
February 5, 2025
Page 2

As Secretary of Veterans Affairs, you have the authority to grant such an exemption to preserve telework and remote work arrangements at the BVA for the benefit of our nation's Veterans. Given the overwhelming evidence that telework has increased productivity, improved case processing times, and reduced costs, granting an exemption for the Board is not only justified but essential.

President Trump's misguided return to work mandate would not only require additional office space – incurring unnecessary costs – but it would also be a catastrophic blow to the Board's operations. Such a move would result in a sharp decline in productivity and morale. When combined with canceled job openings due to the hiring freeze, these draconian policies will cause significant attrition of the BVA's hard-working workforce and significantly undermine the Board's ability to process appeals — further delaying the delivery of benefits to our nation's veterans.

The Board's ability to deliver timely, high-quality decisions is a matter of national importance, and any disruption to its operations would directly impact those who have served our country. The data is clear: remote work and telework agreements have improved productivity, efficiency, and cost-effectiveness at the BVA. In FY 2023 alone, the Board surpassed 100,000 decisions, reduced pending appeals for the first time in years, and improved quality assurance – all while operating primarily in a virtual environment. These successes should not be reversed.

We strongly urge the Department of Veterans Affairs to preserve and protect the current telework and remote work policies at the BVA. The ability to continue working remotely is essential to maintaining efficiency, reducing costs, and most importantly, ensuring that our nation's Veterans receive timely decisions on their appeals.

Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter.

Sincerely,



Mark Takano
Ranking Member
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs



Richard Blumenthal
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Cc: Representative Mike Bost, Chairman, House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Senator Jerry Moran, Chairman, Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

2/19/25, 11:57 AM

Despite exemptions, VA employees still feeling impact from policies shaking up federal workforce

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EXCLUSIVE

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Despite exemptions, VA employees still feeling impact from policies shaking up federal workforce

VA employees who work on the Veterans Crisis Line (VCL) say the hiring freeze has affected the hiring of support staff.



Jory Heckman | @jheckmanWFED

February 14, 2025 6:25 pm ⌚ 9 min read



*This story includes mentions of suicidal ideation. If you are having thoughts of suicide or self-harm, contact 911 or the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988. Veterans calling 988 should press *1 to reach the Veterans Crisis Line*

The Department of Veterans Affairs exempted many of its frontline employees from a [governmentwide hiring freeze \(https://federalnewsnetwork.com/hiring-retention/2025/01/va-exempts-300000-health-care-positions-from-governmentwide-hiring-freeze/\)](https://federalnewsnetwork.com/hiring-retention/2025/01/va-exempts-300000-health-care-positions-from-governmentwide-hiring-freeze/), the Office of Personnel Management's "deferred resignation offer." (<https://federalnewsnetwork.com/veterans-affairs/2025/02/va-carves-out-major-workforce-exemptions-to-opms-deferred-resignation-offer/>) and more recently, a [widespread firing of probationary hires \(https://federalnewsnetwork.com/workforce/2025/02/opm-fires-probationary-employees-after-deferred-resignation-deadline/\)](https://federalnewsnetwork.com/workforce/2025/02/opm-fires-probationary-employees-after-deferred-resignation-deadline/) across the federal government.

Multiple VA employees, however, who requested anonymity to avoid retaliation, told Federal News Network that some of the department's essential functions — such as health care and a hotline for veterans in crisis — are still being impacted, despite these exemptions.

A health care professional told Federal News Network that he's been waiting for a final job offer for a position that the VA exempted from the hiring freeze, but was told "HR is unable to access the forms" to complete the onboarding.

2/19/25, 11:57 AM

Despite exemptions, VA employees still feeling impact from policies shaking up federal workforce

"It's affected individuals that are exempt and in the last part of being hired," he said.

— [Is your IT team ready to solve a potentially network-crippling problem? Learn tips and tactics for a successful resiliency strategy in our new ebook, sponsored by PagerDuty.](#)

(https://federalnewsnetwork.com/cme-event/federal-insights/how-to-master-it-resilience/?utm_medium=referral&utm_source=in-article_promo&utm_campaign=pagerduty&utm_content=in-articlepromo)

The VA uses [USA Staffing \(https://onboard.usastaffing.gov/Account/Login\)](https://onboard.usastaffing.gov/Account/Login), a talent acquisition system created by OPM, to onboard new hires. In recent weeks, VA employees told Federal News Network that in some cases, a new popup window prevents the department's human resources staff from moving forward with new hires.

"Your request has been submitted to the Office of Personnel Management for approval. A notification will be sent to your email once a decision is made," the new pop-up window states. "Contact [tracking@OPM.gov \(mailto:tracking@OPM.gov\)](mailto:tracking@OPM.gov) with any questions."

These problems are not encountered consistently across the VA. Some VA employees say they've been able to access recruitment files on USA Staffing without any problems, while others say it has prevented them from filling positions VA exempted from the hiring freeze.

A VA spokesperson told Federal News Network that "VA is working with OPM to ensure hiring excepted roles during the freeze is as efficient as possible and in line with the president's priorities."

VA walks back some firings made in error

The VA and several other agencies fired their probationary employees on Thursday, after meeting with the Office of Personnel Management. The department [said in a statement \(https://news.va.gov/press-room/va-dismisses-more-than-1000-employees/\)](#) that it dismissed more than 1,000 non-bargaining unit probationary employees.

According to multiple sources, however, the VA inadvertently fired employees who were no longer in their probationary period, or were bargaining unit employees. These sources said the VA is in the process of reinstating these employees.

"Because VA used the system of record, which is rife with errors, many of the employees did not meet these criteria," one VA employee told Federal News Network.

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(<https://federalnewsnetwork.com/email-alerts/>)

Federal News Network has reached out to the VA for comment.

2/19/25, 11:57 AM

Despite exemptions, VA employees still feeling impact from policies shaking up federal workforce

VA crisis line staff feel hiring freeze's impact on support personnel

VA employees who work on the Veterans Crisis Line (VCL) say the hiring freeze has affected the hiring of support staff, and that a governmentwide return-to-office mandate may complicate the mission of its largely remote workforce.

Erika Alexander, president of AFGE Local 518, which represents up to 1,000 Veterans Crisis Line employees and approximately 400 member services employees in Atlanta, said the governmentwide hiring freeze has prevented the Veterans Crisis Line from hiring trainers and "silent monitors," or quality assurance staff who provide feedback and coaching to hotline responders. The crisis line, however, is still hiring responders who answer calls.

"You're going to overwhelm the supervisors, because they can't hire supervisors to manage the new responders that are coming in. It's a ripple effect," Alexander said.

Alexander, who's worked at the VA's crisis line for eight years, said the hiring freeze has also prevented VCL from hiring social science assistants (SSAs), who call 911 on behalf of hotline responders.

"If I'm a crisis responder, and a veteran calls me saying that he's going to end his life, and he's refusing to put the gun away or whatever it might be that they're saying — they're going to harm themselves — I reach out to the SSA for assistance with getting a welfare check completed. And there's a hiring freeze on those people as well," she said.

VCL handles about 60,000 calls a month. Alexander estimated that a crisis responder will take anywhere from five to 10 calls a shift. In some cases, VCL responders can be on the phone with a veteran in crisis for hours. Those crises include veterans feeling suicidal, having PTSD symptoms or anxiety, or experiencing homelessness and seeking VA resources.

"We are the ones who speak to them. We de-escalate the situation. We provide them support," Alexander said.

VA member services employees deal with pharmacy requests, such as refilling prescriptions, billing, and handling enrollment and eligibility for VA services.

— [Read more: Veterans Affairs](#)

(<https://federalnewsnetwork.com/category/veterans-affairs/>)

The VA last month [exempted more than 300,000 health care positions](#) (<https://federalnewsnetwork.com/hiring-retention/2025/01/va-exempts-300000-health-care-positions-from-governmentwide-hiring-freeze/>) from the governmentwide hiring freeze — about three-quarters of the Veterans Health Administration employees. But Bryan Harper, president of AFGE Local 906, which represents several thousand VA employees in Topeka, Kansas who work for

<https://federalnewsnetwork.com/veterans-affairs/2025/02/va-employees-feel-impact-from-policies-shaking-up-federal-workforce-despite-exemptions/>

3/9

2/19/25, 11:57 AM

Despite exemptions, VA employees still feeling impact from policies shaking up federal workforce

the Veterans Crisis Line, member services and the department's clinical contact center, said hiring still largely remains on hold in Eastern Kansas.

"For the most part, it's pretty much a hiring freeze on all jobs. If you had a start date by the time the executive order came out, within a week you still got the job. But after that, it was a carte blanche hiring freeze all around," Harper said. "We've asked for them to be an exemption because this should not be affecting VCL, because of the job they do. This should not be affecting member services. This is what gives veterans access to care. We're not wanting to restrict that, and that's exactly what this is doing, is restricting our veterans' access to care."

Starting in July 2022, all landline and cell phone users could connect to the National Suicide Hotline by dialing 988, because of [legislation Congress passed two years prior](https://www.congress.gov/bills/116/congress/senate-bill/2661). Callers who dial 988 and then press "1" are connected to the Veterans Crisis Line. Harper said that after 988's launch sought VA to add 1,000 VCL positions, but so far, there are still "easily" 500 VCL positions the department needs to fill.

"They're maybe halfway through hiring all of them, because they're struggling to find more people," Harper said.

Those recruitment efforts, he added, may become harder, if VCL employees, like many other federal employees, are called back into the office full-time.

VCL employees in Atlanta previously worked in VA office space, but have been working remotely since April 2020. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, VCL employees were put on mandatory telework, but were officially designated as remote workers in 2022.

"Our duty station is our home. Those of us who live in Atlanta, or even the other states, we have no office to go into," Alexander said. Some VCL employees, she added, live two hours from the nearest VA clinic or hospital, and there is no office space nearby that's available 24/7 to meet the crisis line's mission.

President Donald Trump [signed a memorandum](https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/return-to-in-person-work/) on Jan. 20 calling for all teleworking and remote work employees to return to the office. But it remains unclear what office space — if any — is available for VCL and member services employees.

In a labor-management forum last week, Alexander said she asked if VA management had submitted any exemptions for VCL employees to remain remote. Alexander said management had not yet submitted those exemption requests, because they are "awaiting guidance as to when they should even submit that information."

"They're telling us that they don't know anything. They're saying that they have not been given any guidance. They're awaiting information like we are," she said.

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Despite exemptions, VA employees still feeling impact from policies shaking up federal workforce

Harper said supervisors are instructing VCL employees to be within a 50-mile radius of one of five hubs scattered across the U.S.—Atlanta; Topeka; Canandaigua, New York; Waco, Texas; and Hot Springs, Arkansas.

Harper, however, estimated there are 800-900 remote VCL employees who have never reported to an office, and may be hundreds of miles from the nearest hub. Only three VCL employees work fully in-person at the Eastern Kansas VA Medical Center, he added, but the vast majority of his bargaining unit employees work remotely.

"Right now, we're spread across the United States. For you to sit there and tell somebody in California, 'You must now pack up and move to Topeka' ... at minimum, you're going to lose 60% to 70% [of staff]. It will crumble VCL overnight if you force them to do this," he said.

A VA spokesperson said the "VA's policy (<https://news.va.gov/press-room/va-announces-return-to-in-person-work-policy/>) is to bring as many employees back to the office as space permits."

"VA will make accommodations as needed to ensure employees have enough space to work and will always ensure that veterans' access to benefits and services remains uninterrupted as employees return to in-person work," the spokesperson said.

While some members of Congress have blasted federal employees not working in the office as inefficient, or not doing their jobs, Alexander said VCL employees are closely monitored.

VCL has an "air traffic control" department that monitors every move its responders make. Alexander said she and her coworkers log into a system at the start of every shift that tracks when they take calls, take breaks or eat lunch. Employees log codes keeping track of what they're doing.

"Your time is literally monitored from the time you log in to the time you log out," she said. "And if you're in the wrong code for too long, someone will reach out to you and ask you, 'Are you OK? Do you need help with something? Did you realize that you were still on break?'"

Supervisors and silent monitors also have the ability to look at a VCL employee's computer screen at any time.

"There is complete oversight on all the work that we do," Alexander said.

Hiring freeze briefly impacted VA onboarding new volunteers

The Trump administration's hiring freeze, up until recently, also prevented the VA from onboarding new volunteers. Earlier this month, the VA [posted a message](https://web.archive.org/web/20250201221009/https://www.cdceportal.va.gov/volunteer_at_facility/) (https://web.archive.org/web/20250201221009/https://www.cdceportal.va.gov/volunteer_at_facility/) on its website stating the governmentwide hiring freeze prevented the department from onboarding new volunteers.

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"Due to the Presidential Memorandum (PM) entitled 'Hiring Freeze,' the Center for Development and Civic Engagement (CDCE) office is not permitted to onboard any without compensated appointments (WOC), including volunteers, as of January 20, 2025," the message stated. "During this period, you may still submit an interest form and when the hiring freeze is lifted CDCE staff will be able to contact you to begin the onboarding process."

The message no longer appears on the VA website.

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