STATEMENT BY
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DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS SECRETARY
BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
MAY 15, 2025

Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Takano, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the state of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

Since becoming VA Secretary, I've met many of the men and women who show up to work every day at the Department with a deep dedication to our mission – delivering health care and benefits to millions of Veterans who've served our nation. They have my sincere thanks, and I can't wait to meet more of them in the months ahead.

In this same period, I've come to learn what many of you on this committee also realize: VA is in need of reform. We must do a better job delivering timely care to Veterans, getting to "yes" so Veterans can get the benefits they've earned, and making sure the money Congress appropriates to VA is not diverted to non-mission-critical or even wasteful programs.

In the old days, way back in 2024, discussions in Congress about the need to reform VA were often just a thinly veiled request for more employees. But the Department's history shows that adding more employees to the system doesn't automatically mean better results.

The Biden Administration's record is a perfect example. During those four years, VA failed to address nearly all of its most serious problems, such as benefits backlogs and rising health care wait times. The numbers speak for themselves:

The number of VA employees grew by more than 52,000 full-time equivalents from FY21 to FY24. Did all those extra people make things better for Veterans? No. In fact, VA's performance got worse, as health care wait times and the disability benefits backlog increased.

Something has to change, and it's up to us to make that change. Under President Trump, we are working to solve problems that have persisted at VA for decades. Our goal is to create a Department that works better for the Veterans, families, caregivers and survivors that we serve.

I've never been shy when it comes to addressing tough issues head-on, and I won't ignore the elephant in the room here today. As everyone here is aware, we're conducting a thorough review of the Department's structure and staffing across the enterprise.

As I've said countless times, this review is aimed at finding ways to improve care and benefits for Veterans without cutting care and benefits for Veterans. Our goal is to increase productivity and efficiency, eliminate waste and bureaucracy, and improve the delivery of health care and benefits to Veterans.

We're going to maintain VA's mission-essential jobs like doctors, nurses, and claims processors, while phasing out non-mission essential roles like interior designers and Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) officers. The savings we achieve will be redirected to Veteran health care and benefits.

Our goal is to ensure we have employees where they are needed, cut unnecessary overhead, and strategically reduce staff to ensure VA's budget is mostly going directly to Veterans. We will accomplish this without making cuts to health care or benefits to Veterans or VA beneficiaries.

Year after year, calls for VA reform come from every corner – lawmakers, the media, watchdogs like Inspectors General and the Government Accountability Office, Veterans Service Organizations, and individual Veterans across the country.

This year, finally, we have embarked on a historic effort to reform VA. We've been emphatic that we won't be cutting benefits and health care – only improving them. And we're engaging career subject matter experts, senior executives, and political leadership to restructure the Department so it works better for Veterans.

We are doing what literally all VA stakeholders agree needs to be done. So, what has the reaction been? We've been met with a barrage of false rumors, innuendo, disinformation, and speculation implying we're firing doctors and nurses, forcing staff to work in closets and showers, and that there is "chaos" across the Department.

Why? Because we canceled some duplicative contracts for work VA can and should be doing in-house, and we let go of one half of one percent of non-mission critical employees.

To hear our critics tell it, the Department was absolutely perfect until we started making changes in January 2025. Everyone knows that's not true.

The fact is that VA health care has been on the Government Accountability Office's high-risk list for more than a decade. GAO even says VA faces "system-wide challenges in overseeing patient safety and access to care, hiring critical staff, and meeting future infrastructure needs." We are working hard to fix these and other issues, and we need your help. We want to work with Congress to fix VA. But our shared goal needs to be making things better for Veterans rather than protecting the Department's broken bureaucracy.

The Department of Veterans Affairs is not a federal jobs program. It is an organization whose sole purpose is to serve Veterans. We must never lose sight of that.

We're just over 100 days into the second Trump Administration, and despite major opposition from many in the media, union bosses, and some in Congress, we're already making significant progress to better serve Veterans, including:

- We are refocusing on our core mission, which is providing the best possible care and benefits to Veterans, families, caregivers, and survivors.
- That means we're making sure Veterans get the health care choices they were promised under the MISSION Act.
- We're taking thousands of employees off remote work and bringing them back to the office, where we can work as a team to better serve Veterans.
- We're phasing out treatment for gender dysphoria.
- We're accelerating the deployment of our modern electronic health record system, after the program was nearly dormant under the Biden Administration.
- We're processing record numbers of disability claims.
- We're redirecting hundreds of millions of dollars from non-mission-critical efforts to health care, benefits, and services that directly support VA beneficiaries.
- We're creating a better system to more quickly and effectively provide survivors the services, support, and compassion they've earned.
- And we've ended DEI at the department, reversing the divisive Biden-era policies and stopping more than $14 million in DEI spending.

But we're just getting started. We have an obligation to make VA work better for the Veterans, families, caregivers, and survivors that we are charged with serving. That is exactly what we have been doing and exactly what we will continue to do.

President Trump sent his FY 2026 budget request to Congress on May 2, 2025. President Trump is committed to balancing the budget while providing adequate funding for critical nondefense discretionary priorities—securing our borders, caring for our Veterans, and continued infrastructure investment. Reaching balance requires:

- resetting the proper balance between Federal and State responsibilities with a renewed emphasis on federalism;
- eliminating the Federal Government's support of woke ideology;
- protecting the American people by deconstructing a wasteful and weaponized bureaucracy; and
- identifying and eliminating wasteful spending.

The budget levels reflect the reforms necessary to enable VA to fulfill its statutory responsibilities in the most cost-effective manner possible.

The budget provides increased funding for health care services tailored to Veterans' needs, both at VA medical centers and in the community. The budget ensures that the Nation's Veterans are provided with the world-class health care that they deserve. In addition, Veterans who qualify for access to care with local community providers would be empowered to make the choice to see them, rather than having to drive, in some cases, hours to access the nearest VA facility.

The VA discretionary budget request for fiscal year (FY) 2026 is $134.6 billion, and $52.6 billion for Toxic Exposures Fund (TEF), for a total request of $187.2 billion. This is an increase of $27.6 billion (+17%) above the FY 2025 enacted level.

VA is committed to ending Veteran homelessness. The budget includes a new effort, Rental Assistance to Homeless Veterans, which will provide $1.1 billion to support the President's commitment to end Veteran homelessness. VA will be directly responsible for programs and financial support to provide rental assistance and other support services.

The budget request also includes $3.5 billion for the Electronic Health Record Modernization (EHRM) program. VA's EHRM effort is moving the Department from a decades-old legacy system to a modern system that is interoperable with systems at the Department of Defense and other Federal partners, as well as participating community

care providers, allowing clinicians to easily access a veteran's full medical history anywhere they seek care. Acceleration of the EHRM rollout is now a top VA priority effort. The FY 2026 funding will enable VA to complete planned deployments in FY 2027.

Further details on the full VA budget request will be available when OMB releases the complete FY 2026 budget.

Thank you for your time and attention, and I look forward to your questions.

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