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August 9, 2018

VIA ELECTRONIC DELIVERY

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

Dear Secretary Wilkie:

I am writing with grave concern over reports of improper interference and secretive meddling in U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) policy and operations by three politically-connected members of the Mar-a-Lago Club. I am also writing to urge you to swiftly remove all political appointees within the Department who are pushing a partisan agenda of privatizing VA medical care and leading politically-motivated staff firings, re-assignments and retaliation rather than working toward the best interest of Veterans.

I urge you to immediately cut ties with Ike Perlmutter, Bruce Moskowitz and Marc Sherman, all of whom are unqualified to provide advice to the Department and whose involvement in policy decisions lack transparency and is not subject to effective oversight. Your success as Secretary will depend upon your ability to make personnel and policy choices that are free from political or outside interference and in the best interest of the VA and the Veterans you serve.

The VA has historically been non-partisan. Previous Secretaries who have served under both Republican and Democratic Presidents have been approved by the Senate unanimously or with wide bipartisan majorities. They have enjoyed broad support from the Veteran community because of the community's faith in the Secretary's ability to put politics aside in service to Veterans. From the Senior Executive Service level down to front-line workers, the VA has traditionally been staffed by non-partisan career civil servants, many of whom are Veterans themselves who are committed to selflessly serving other Veterans.

Over the past year and half, however, a series of personnel actions and leadership shake-ups have eroded the bipartisan foundation of the VA. These actions have raised questions as to who is actually in charge of the Department and whether current senior leadership sees serving Veterans or their own political interests as their primary mission.

This has been most egregiously exposed in recent reporting by ProPublica that sheds a light on the outsized influence that Ike Perlmutter, Bruce Moskowitz and Marc Sherman—who hold no official government position, connection to the VA or expertise in Veterans affairs—wielded

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over personnel decisions and policy formulation behind the scenes. Reports outline that consequential decisions regarding how Veterans receive their care and access their benefits are being made by "advisors" whose main qualifications appear to be money and access to the President. A recently released email revealed that every individual recommended for removal by outside advisor, Jake Leinenkugel, is now gone from the VA, replaced with allies or, disturbingly, Leinenkugel himself, in the case of an apparent self-appointment to head up the commission on mental health. While Presidents of both parties should be able to hire the cabinet, staff and trusted outside advisors they need, this group of unqualified individuals appears to have truly unprecedented and extensive influence over the VA's operations.

Such influence has far-reaching implications for the VA and is particularly apparent in the mass exodus of senior career civil servants with deep expertise in Veterans affairs. It has been widely reported that prior to your confirmation and swearing-in, then-Acting Secretary Peter O'Rourke undertook a significant reorganization and reassignment of dozens of staff within the executive suite in what some describe as a "loyalty purge." Such significant personnel decisions made by an unconfirmed, temporary individual serving in an acting capacity represents a further politicization of a workforce that has historically been non-political. It also represents a loss of expertise and institutional knowledge that could be critical for you to draw upon as you assume your secretarial duties.

Tellingly, significant vacancies remain in critical offices throughout the VA: there is no permanent Deputy Secretary, no permanent Under Secretary for Health and no permanent Assistant Secretary for Information and Technology. Vacancies in these important offices highlight the significant personnel churn the Department has suffered and profoundly affects the VA's ability to operate in an optimal manner to advance the Veteran experience with the VA, ensure the delivery of their benefits and provide for their health. These downstream impacts are very real and troubling.

Other contentious actions undertaken by political appointees have only served to exacerbate the situation. For example, in a remarkable back and forth, Acting Secretary O'Rourke attempted to assert his authority over the Department's Office of Inspector General (OIG) by claiming that the OIG is not independent, but rather works for and reports to the Secretary. As you know and as you testified in your confirmation hearing, such an assertion is false. This adversarial positioning only highlights the Department's new combative posture, which in the long run only undermines the effectiveness of the VA.

Moreover, in what appears to be a rush to enact further far reaching reforms prior to your swearing-in, an executive order limiting union official time was pushed through, causing chaos at the VA. Unfortunately, such actions alienate the Department's employees and sow confusion throughout the organization.

In our meeting and in your Congressional testimony, you pledged to walk your post, to put Veterans first; you said you were empowered, free from influence to manage the VA as you saw fit. As you assume your new role, I would remind you of those commitments.

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The VA faces significant challenges, but in order to address them, the outsized role that political appointees and a handful of outside advisors are playing in personnel decisions and in the formulation of VA policy must end, particularly the tenures of Mr. O'Rourke and Camilo Sandoval whose efforts to undermine VA leadership has been especially pernicious and well-documented. I urge you to take a comprehensive look at every action undertaken, and every policy implemented and carried out under the direction of Acting Secretary O'Rourke since the firing of Dr. David Shulkin, to ensure that it aligns with the mission of the VA and is in service to Veterans, not in service to a political agenda or the whims of outside voices.

I also urge you to take a comprehensive look at your current staffing and to rely on those career civil servants and the Veterans themselves for your counsel. Individuals who seek to undermine your authority, operate with ulterior motives or put their own self-interests ahead of Veterans must be removed swiftly.

The mission of the VA is too important to have it hijacked by a select few who seek private gain from those who have borne the battle. Congress stands ready to support you in your efforts at righting the ship and bringing a renewed sense of order and calm to the Department.

Sincerely,



Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator