



PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

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Prepared for

The Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

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Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Tester and members of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, thank you for the opportunity to offer the views of the Partnership for Public Service on the progress the department is making during the first 60 days of Secretary Wilkie's leadership. As a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that strives for a more effective government for the American people, we help agencies attract mission-critical talent, advocate for systemic changes to modernize government's outdated personnel system and develop high-performing federal leaders. The topic of leadership is core to the Partnership's mission and one that we know to be crucial to agency mission success.

Secretary Wilkie and his leadership team have a big job ahead of them and limited time in which to do it. The secretary is responsible for leading an organization of over 300,000 employees, 145 medical facilities, one-hundred-plus burial sites, dozens of benefits offices and 9 million veteran patients with just a handful of years to lay out a vision and set a course.¹ There will be strong incentives to focus on policy implementation at the expense of strengthening the management systems that are the groundwork for the department's long-term success. To position the VA to meet the needs of current veterans while setting itself up for the future, Secretary Wilkie and his team must effectively collaborate with Congress, the veterans community and other key stakeholders, promote greater accountability at all levels of the department and assume responsibility for the overall health of this organization that is so important to the millions of veterans they serve.

Congress is an essential stakeholder and steward of the government's solemn commitment to veterans and their families. The Partnership believes that the VA performs best when it is supported by and accountable to the legislative branch. The committee deserves recognition for the way it has conducted rigorous bipartisan oversight, promoted constructive dialogue with the department's leaders and committed itself to the difficult work of transforming the department. The commitment of this committee to proactive and thorough oversight of the VA's management and programs sets a positive example for other committees to follow.

An ongoing area of emphasis for the committee has been personnel, and for good reason - dedicated, mission-driven employees are critical to VA's success. While this committee has focused on the need for the department to hold its employees accountable for their performance, and understandably so, we believe it is equally important to learn from the hundreds of thousands of Americans, many of whom are veterans themselves, who accomplish great things for veterans and on behalf of veterans every day as department employees. The secretary and the committee can learn from their success, and find ways to replicate it throughout the department.

The Partnership's Service to America Medals (Sammies) program is an annual event that recognizes incredible civil servants who have led significant accomplishments on behalf of the American people, and VA employees are well-represented among our honorees. These individuals each demonstrate just some of the incredible work of the department's employees and their dedication to serving veterans.

One such employee is Marcy Jacobs, the executive director for VA's Digital Service Team, who worked with her team to enhance the Vets.gov website to help veterans apply for, track and manage their benefits. By giving veterans a single point of contact, her team has made it easier for veterans to access the department's services, with more than 1.6 million veterans having logged into an account. Another honoree, Dr. Rory Cooper, led the VA's Human Engineering Research Laboratories to help improve mobility and quality of life for hundreds of thousands of disabled veterans. Dr. Cooper and his team

¹ Statement of The Honorable Michael J. Missal Inspector General of the Department of Veterans Affairs before the Committee on Veterans' Affairs U.S. House of Representatives Hearing on "The Curious Case of the VISN Takeover: Assessing VA's Governance Structure", 115th Cong., 13 (2018).

spearheaded innovations that include wheelchairs with robotic arms, improved motorized wheelchairs, and other features that have earned his team 25 separate patents.

VA employees are also on the front lines of addressing homelessness among the veteran population. Dr. Thomas O'Toole of the Providence VA Medical Center helped found the National Center on Homelessness Among Veterans, which helps veterans access the comprehensive medical care, housing assistance and social services they need to reclaim their lives. Another VA employee, Anne Barker Dunn, created two programs that provided support to incarcerated veterans that offered access to critical services and assisted with substance abuse and housing needs.

We recommend that the committee do more to engage the secretary and the department's staff in understanding why these civil servants are able to innovate and solve problems, and how those lessons learned can be applied across the department. While the passage of the Veterans Affairs Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act of 2017 represents a significant shift in the department's approach to addressing accountability and leadership challenges, the cultural changes this committee would like to see at the VA will not occur simply by firing underperforming employees. As the stories above demonstrate, the VA's employees are the department's greatest asset—not a cost to be borne. The focus of VA's leaders should be on supporting, encouraging and engaging high-performing employees and building a culture of excellence. This is hard work and requires a critical view of every aspect of the organization—accountability is simply one part. Perhaps most critical is the need to examine the effectiveness of the department's most senior political and career leaders who are charged with motivating, inspiring and managing each of the VA's three hundred thousand-plus employees.

Capable leadership is essential to a healthy organizational culture. Research by the Partnership for Public Service as part of our *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government Rankings*[®] has found that leadership is the single biggest driver of employee satisfaction and commitment across government and within the Department of Veterans Affairs specifically. The rankings show that in 2017 VA ranked second to last among large agencies in employee satisfaction with senior leaders and last in satisfaction with supervisors.² I strongly encourage the committee to take a hard look at VA's All-Employee Survey and the non-VA Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey to assess the impact of last year's accountability legislation and the administration's progress in turning around the department's culture. As the administration's nominee for the Office of Accountability and Whistleblower Protection, Tamara Bonzanto, told the committee earlier this month, “[I]f you improve the culture and employees are satisfied with their environment that they're working in and they feel safe working in that environment in reporting concerns, hopefully, we can get improvement in customer services” and, ultimately, better care for veterans.

Undergirding the transformation pursued by the committee and Secretary Wilkie must be a commitment to the stewardship of the Department of Veterans Affairs as an organization – in other words, the management systems, infrastructure, and employees who make the department's success possible. The VA's leaders, particularly its political appointees, must assume a sense of ownership for the long-term health of the institution. Secretary Wilkie should, even now, be thinking beyond his tenure at the department to the department he will be leaving to the individual who follows him as secretary. As a practical matter, such leader ownership requires prioritizing the VA's organizational health by building a pipeline of future leaders, connecting management to performance outcomes using data, institutionalizing

² "Department of Veterans Affairs." *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government*. 2017. Accessed September 25, 2018. http://bestplacestowork.org/BPTW/rankings/detail/VA00#tab_category_tbl.

key reforms, and holding leaders at every level accountable, including through the use of performance plans as required by the VA Choice and Quality Employment Act.³

I believe the priorities Secretary Wilkie laid out during his nomination hearing—to improve the department’s culture, to focus on customer service and access to care, to strengthening mission support functions like information technology and human resources—are the right ones. Secretary Wilkie can promote a sense of ownership while effectively addressing those priorities by taking advantage of promising practices and innovations already occurring within the VA. For example, the Veterans Health Administration’s Innovators Network promotes and spreads promising practices initiated by frontline employees across the VHA healthcare system. Innovative ideas developed by employees include using 3D printing to help surgeons prepare for procedures and interviewing veterans about their lives so that their stories can help medical providers offer improved care.⁴ While these improvements are occurring in pockets of the agency, the department can do more to promote innovation widely: data from the 2017 FEVS found that just 32.4 percent of employees believed that the VA rewarded creativity and innovation.

The department has the talent, resources, and commitment to mission that it needs to allow innovation in the service of veterans to thrive. The secretary set the right tone in his initial address to VA employees in July, stating that “[I]t is from you that the ideas we carry to the Congress, the VSOs and to America’s Veterans will come.”⁵ It will be up to Secretary Wilkie and other leaders across the department to follow through and create an environment in which that is truly the case.

Congress and this committee can and should play an important role in supporting innovation and promoting a sense of ownership and accountability in spirit and practice. Through its oversight, the committee can look for bright spots within the VA and ways to replicate them across the department. The committee can ensure that the VA is maximizing the use of new personnel and programmatic authorities granted to it over the last several years to improve service and care. Finally, it can continue to work with Secretary Wilkie, his leadership team, and others in the department in a collaborative spirit. I believe Ranking Member Tester’s words during Secretary Wilkie’s confirmation hearing, that “if there is good communication between you and the members of this committee, particularly the chairman and myself, I think we can smooth a lot of those rough waters.”⁶ I urge the committee to continue in that spirit.

Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Tester and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to share the Partnership’s views on the opportunities and challenges confronting the Department of Veterans Affairs as Secretary Wilkie begins his tenure and the next chapter in the story of the VA’s transformation. Success now and in the future will require close collaboration between the VA and Congress, a focus on engagement as well as accountability, leaders taking ownership of the department as an institution, and a continuing commitment to innovation. It is an important way to honor our shared commitment to America’s veterans.

³ Section 203 of S.1094, 115th Cong. (2017) (enacted).

⁴ Ogrysko, Nicole. "How the VHA Innovators Network Is 'changing Narrative' of Complacency." FederalNewsRadio.com. September 12, 2018. Accessed September 25, 2018. <https://federalnewsradio.com/veterans-affairs/2018/09/how-the-vha-innovators-network-is-turning-changing-narrative-of-complacency/>.

⁵ Wilkie, Robert. "A Message to VA's Workforce from Secretary Wilkie." VAntage Point. August 03, 2018. Accessed September 25, 2018. <https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/50910/a-message-to-vas-workforce-from-secretary-robert-wilkie/>.

⁶ *Hearing on the Nomination of Robert Wilkie to be Veterans Affairs Secretary before the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, United States Senate, 115th Congress. 2 (2018),* https://www.veterans.senate.gov/hearings/pending-nomination_-secretary-06272018