



June 3, 2014

Honorable Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama:

As Governors who have millions of veterans living in our states, we are deeply troubled and outraged by the significant negligence and systemic delays in patient care throughout the Veterans Affairs health system. While we believe that your decision to accept the resignation of Secretary Eric Shinseki was appropriate, this change is only the beginning of many needed reforms to protect and care for our nation's veterans.

As a nation and as government leaders, we have a duty and obligation to provide the best care and services possible to those individuals who have given of themselves to defend our country and our citizens. The dedication, service and sacrifice these individuals make on a daily basis ensures the safety and freedoms we, as Americans, enjoy and cherish. We owe these servicemen and women our sincere gratitude and appreciation, and we must demand more from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to honor the sacrifices of our American veterans.

States have taken the obligation to care for these men and women very seriously. For example, Texas, Florida and Pennsylvania are home to more than four million veterans—the second, third and fourth largest veteran populations in the country. Texas has a strong history of serving its veterans dating back to the Texas Revolution when it issued land grant certificates to Texans

who rendered military service in battle. More recently, Texas was the first, and one of the few states, to provide dedicated state resources to help reduce the shameful federal backlog of veterans' claims for disability benefits. Since their inception, the State Strike Force Teams have reviewed almost 45,000 cases and, in conjunction with the efforts of the VA, helped reduce the backlog from 68,612 to close to 26,000. Texas will also help lead the way in providing state support for our veterans.

Similarly, the citizens of Florida amended their State Constitution to create the Florida Department of Veterans Affairs and tasked this state agency with representing the interests of Florida veterans. The agency was designed to advocate for these veterans and to intercede on their behalf, when necessary, with the federal VA. When recent reports arose of the dangerous and neglectful conditions in Florida facilities, the Florida Agency for Health Care Administration sent trained state inspectors to ensure that veterans were receiving the care they deserve. VA officials turned away these inspectors seven times at six different facilities.

The Pennsylvania Department of Military and Veterans Affairs strives every day to ensure that Pennsylvania veterans have access to the resources and services they need within the jurisdiction of the Commonwealth. Pennsylvania recently established the Governor's Advisory Council for Veterans Services and created the Veterans Trust Fund to assist County Directors, Veteran service organizations and non-profits to coordinate programs and better support military and Veteran services. As reports from across Pennsylvania that hundreds of veterans are being denied or delayed access to health care through the VA affairs health system and that one of the 42 medical facilities under federal investigation may be in the Commonwealth, Pennsylvania has mobilized the Council, which is coordinating a statewide effort to reach out to veterans and ensure their issues are being addressed at the highest levels of government.

Louisiana is proud to support the over 315,000 veterans who call that great state home. Whether it is through Veterans Service Offices in parishes across the state where veterans and their families receive local, personal assistance in applying for benefits, or through state-of-the-art long term care at one of five veterans' homes, the state's Department of Veterans Affairs has and will continue to serve Louisiana veterans proudly. But, the recent revelations of mismanagement at the VA along with reports showing the failures of the VA healthcare system in New Orleans are disturbing. It is disgraceful that our veterans – many of whom stood in harm's way for our freedoms – would receive such poor treatment.

Maine is similarly disappointed by the state of the Veterans Affairs healthcare system, and the unacceptable treatment of our nation's veterans. Maine has the second highest per capita rate of veterans in the Nation, almost 16 percent of the population. Additionally, 75 percent of those veterans have served our country during wartime. Like Maine as a whole, most are over the age of 55. It is critical that this population of veterans receive prompt and quality medical services. Our veterans have sacrificed so much for their country and they deserve the highest level of care. Maine is committed to work tirelessly to remedy the flawed VA healthcare system.

Reports from states around the country of wait times in a system manipulated by VA leaders to hide the growing problems are not only inexcusable, they demand your immediate and full

attention. Serious reform on behalf of our veterans will require much more than a change in management.

As such, we, governors from across the country, make the following requests as a start to addressing the monumental problems at the VA:

1. Working in partnership with your administration and the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), we request states be given the authority to conduct reviews of all VHA facilities and processes within our states and to recommend potential solutions to the VHA district in which they operate. The goal of such an effort would be to provide reviews by those with a vested interest in the services provided to veterans who have not been part of the current systemic crisis. Our states have professional, trained inspectors and staff that can conduct these reviews and offer solutions. The states could then be a partner with the VHA to ensure the appropriate changes are instituted and accountability is maintained. . Given the claims that high-ranking VA officials, including former Secretary Shinseki, were unaware of the critical nature and scope of problems at VA hospitals throughout the country, it is clear that a system for significant oversight is nonexistent. We suggest additional assistance outside of Washington to guarantee that we urgently identify the breadth of the issues occurring in our states and immediately act to fix the problems made clear in recent weeks.
2. Immediately suspend the current VHA Bonus System until an appropriate review is conducted and proper oversight is established. Any federal funds currently appropriated for the bonus system should be reprogrammed to states through block grants, based upon the percentage of veterans in the state, to be used for direct health care of veterans through fee-for-service agreements.
3. If veterans are unable to secure an appointment within a period of 30 days from the VA, they should be granted Federal vouchers to seek that care from other healthcare providers. And the healthcare providers should be assured that they will receive timely repayment from the Federal government for the treatment that they provide.

It is imperative that our veterans receive the care due to them based on the service and sacrifices they have made for our country, and as Governors, we will not rest until our veterans are receiving the care and respect they deserve.

Mr. President, you have the ability and power to right this wrong and put the health and welfare of our country's veterans first. We stand ready and willing to assist in this most important effort to help our veterans get the quality and timely medical care they deserve. We await your prompt and positive response to the requests outlined in this letter.

Sincerely,



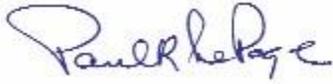
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