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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 19, 2017

The Honorable David Shulkin
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, Northwest
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Shulkin,

We continue to believe that VA's ability to care for women veterans needs further attention. As you know, women veterans are the fastest growing subgroup of veterans and are far less likely to have engaged with VA for services.

The bipartisan Deborah Sampson Act, as introduced, included a significant number of provisions that are critical to ensuring equal access to earned benefits and care for women veterans. Many of these provisions were supported by the Department in testimony. As we continue to push this legislation forward, we have identified a number of noncontroversial yet critical initiatives that we urge the Department to carry out within its existing authority.

VA has found that women veterans underutilize VA care, mostly due to a lack of awareness of their eligibility for benefits and services. Expanding the capabilities of the Women Veterans Call Center to include the use of text messaging would extend access to trained VA staff to additional women veterans who may be intimidated by VA bureaucracy, and prefer to initially engage electronically. This would achieve your goal of enhancing access by providing additional veterans with information on healthcare services, VA benefits and services, as well as a warm hand-off to the women veteran program manager at their local facility. Your estimates show that this will cost only \$2 million over ten years. If you absorb this initiative into your current budget, we believe that the benefits to the fastest growing population of veterans, and the access to VA that could be provided, would be worth the effort.

Annually, Project CHALENG (Community Homelessness Assessment, Local Education and Networking Groups) surveys homeless veterans in order to identify their top needs, in order to inform VA's strategy in connecting with these veterans. Consistently, these surveys find that legal issues are a barrier to many veterans finding housing and getting off the streets. We believe this could be solved through a public private partnership, which would require minimal funds, if any, from VA. Your personal engagement with senior leaders at organizations such as the American Bar Association could encourage them to partner with VA and expand their current

ongoing pro bono efforts to target veterans, especially women veterans, who are experiencing homelessness. We are happy to facilitate an introduction if that is necessary, though it is likely that your General Counsel has channels to support this type of engagement. ABA has supported veterans in pro bono initiatives in the past, including in getting their claims processed. We believe they, and other groups, will be able to be supportive and make a significant difference in the lives of veterans who are homeless.

We continue to hear truly remarkable things about the women veterans mini residency programs operated by VHA. While hiring specific women veteran practitioners should continue to be a focus, we are impressed by the effort to educate existing clinical staff. This is not just a way to continue to invest in the skills of current clinicians, but also an effort to ensure that women veterans are less likely to have a negative experience if they have occasion to seek health care from VA. We urge you to utilize additional funding to expand this program in the coming years. The benefits of doing so, and expanding beyond the clinical specialties currently eligible, especially to emergency room and urgent care clinicians, will pay dividends in making VA a comfortable place for women veterans to seek treatment, often at a difficult time.

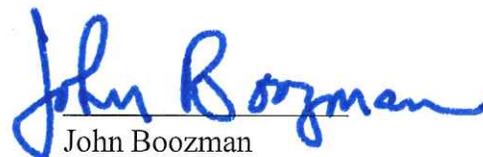
Finally, we urge you to work with your administrations and staff offices to identify ways to better track usage and outcomes of interactions women veterans have with VA. While VA's testimony on this section of the legislation did not support the breadth of data we propose be collected, we believe that you can see a benefit to collecting additional pieces of information. By tracking outcomes and utilization rates, going beyond demographic data only related to eligibility for services, VA will have a far more clear picture of areas and populations of veterans that require additional outreach in order to connect them with VA. Further, tracking outcomes of some of the programs allows VA to ensure that taxpayer resources are being spent effectively on programs that have proven results. We urge you to form a working group to review ways that VA can begin to track additional metrics and gather data related to utilization of programs and their effectiveness by demographic. We request that the Centers for Women and Minority veterans have participation in this working group.

Thank you for your consideration of these requests. While we continue to support your work to make VA more accessible and welcoming to women veterans, we hope that you will take these steps without waiting for legislation, which require minimal resources, but will make a significant difference in how these veterans interact with VA.

Sincerely,



Jon Tester
United States Senator



John Boozman
United States Senator