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July 28, 2020

Honorable Robert Wilkie
Secretary
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Wilkie,

Thank you for your service on behalf of America's veterans. I appreciate your dedication to the courageous men and women who served our great nation in uniform and fought to defend and protect our freedom.

In particular, I want to commend you for the significant increase in nurses the VA has hired in recent months to care for veterans. The shortage of medical staff has been a longstanding challenge and your actions demonstrate your commitment and leadership to resolving this problem.

As you know, the department's Office of Inspector General has also noted that the VA is suffering from "severe" shortages of housekeeping and custodian staff. This is leaving fewer housekeepers to do more as the coronavirus pandemic is requiring "high-touch areas, such as elevators, doorknobs, and railings" to be disinfected more often.

Again, I fully appreciate that addressing these problems requires support and assistance from Congress. I want to do my part to help you by finding resources that could be better spent hiring and providing suitable compensation and protective equipment for housecleaning and custodial staff and other essential employees.

Unfortunately, this is complicated by another longstanding problem, which is the need to clean up the department's books. The spending data submitted by the VA for inclusion in USAspending are not meeting the standards and requirements for completeness, timeliness, accuracy, and quality set by the Digital Accountability and Transparency (DATA) Act, according to reviewed by the OIG. A staggering 60 percent of the VA's spending information totaling nearly \$37 billion within a sample reviewed by the OIG was found to be inaccurate.

I cannot understate how valuable this information is, when provided in a timely, accurate, and complete manner. Under the prior administration, for example, USAspending revealed the VA was purchasing millions of dollars of high end artwork while veterans were subjected to delays accessing care and services, often with tragic outcomes. While progress has been made, the VA appears to have continued acquiring and installing artwork. The descriptions provided in USAspending, however, are vague at best.

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While I appreciate making VA facilities aesthetically pleasing, there are much more important priorities for our veterans.

First and foremost, we must continue your effort to hire more health care professionals and also ensuring adequate compensation for essential workers—like housekeeping staff—who are on the frontlines in our battle against the coronavirus.

To help identify resources that could be better directed towards these goals, I would urge the department to improve the accuracy and reliability of how taxpayer dollars are being spent.

Could you also provide my office with the following information:

- What progress has been made to address (1) the severe shortage of housekeeping and custodial staff; and (2) improve the accuracy, timeliness, completeness, and reliability of spending data submitted to [USAspending](#); and
- How much of the VA's funds were budgeted for art purchases from 2016 to the present? How much was actually spent?

Thank you again for your leadership and please do not hesitate to contact me if I can be of any assistance to you or our nation's veterans.

Sincerely,



Joni K. Ernst
United States Senator