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A Not-for-Profit Veterans Service Organization Chartered by the United States Congress

June 7, 2019

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

Dear Mr. Secretary,

I am writing to you to express our disappointment and grave concern for the failure of the VA to properly implement the bipartisan Honor Our Commitment Act of 2018 (38 U.S. Code § 1712I). This law expanded health benefits to certain veterans with Other-Than-Honorable (OTH) discharges. According to a recent investigation by KING 5 News in Seattle, these veterans have been given confusing, conflicting, and outdated information about their eligibility for health care by front-line VA employees. Such lack of clarity could have the effect of denying care to veterans who need it most. The investigation also revealed that the VA's outreach to OTH veterans has been limited to a single mailing and a few online blog posts, both of which are extremely unlikely to reach veterans who are homeless.

Veterans with OTH discharges are more likely than their peers to suffer from untreated, chronic physical and mental health conditions, to face unemployment, and to have interactions with the criminal justice system. These veterans are also more likely to be minorities, women, and members of the LGBT community. As a result of the character of their discharge and lack of support systems, they're more likely to be homeless. And many are, ultimately, likely to die by suicide.

The VA has not only a statutory but a moral responsibility to ensure that these veterans obtain the care that they need to deal with PTSD, TBI, and related health conditions. The VA cannot realistically combat the problem of veteran suicide if the neediest population is abandoned.

We would hope that you can, and will, take the initiative to prioritize the implementation of the Honor Our Commitment Act, and direct VA managers to ensure that your department meets the challenge of reaching out to, and enrolling into treatment, this vulnerable population. We would ask, too, that you take measures ensure that all relevant VA employees are sufficiently trained on up-to-date eligibility standards; and instruct your staff to devise, and implement, a proper outreach effort to those who have been given inaccurate information about their eligibility and as a result have been denied the health care that they so badly need.

On behalf of the members of VVA and their families, we want to thank you for your efforts to improve VA services to all our nation's veterans.

Sincerely,

John Rowan
CEO/National President