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# United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON  
HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6250

March 15, 2018

The Honorable David J. Shulkin  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Ave., NW  
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Mr. Secretary:

I am writing in response to a recent release of opioid prescribing data from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). As you know, the opioid abuse epidemic impacts every population and geographic region of the United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 42,000 Americans died from opioid overdoses in 2016.<sup>1</sup> In my home state of Missouri, around 60% of the more than 1,300 drug overdose deaths in 2016 involved opioids, and the epidemic cost the state \$12.6 billion that year.<sup>2</sup>

While there are innumerable challenges in addressing this epidemic, there has been measureable progress within the VA healthcare system. I was pleased to see the progress that the Opioid Safety Initiative has made to reduce opioid prescribing rates. VA facilities across the country have had a significant drop in opioid prescribing rates; from 2012 to 2017, for example, opioid prescribing rates have decreased at 99% of VA medical facilities. At the four VA Medical Centers in Missouri, opioid prescribing rates decreased on average by 39%.<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, I am encouraged by VA's commitment to transparency by continuing to publish updated information on a semi-annual basis. VA is the first and only healthcare system to post information about its opioid prescribing rates.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Opioid Overdose: Understanding the Epidemic ([www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/epidemic/index.html](http://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/epidemic/index.html)) (accessed Mar. 5, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> *Opioid Crisis Drives Declines in U.S., Missouri Life Expectancy*, Columbia Missourian (Jan. 10, 2018) ([www.columbiamissourian.com/news/local/opioid-crisis-drives-declines-in-u-s-missouri-lifeexpectancy/article\\_cd71e66e-f488-11e7-ac3f-d77b751b7c73.html](http://www.columbiamissourian.com/news/local/opioid-crisis-drives-declines-in-u-s-missouri-lifeexpectancy/article_cd71e66e-f488-11e7-ac3f-d77b751b7c73.html)); *Opioid Crisis Cost Missouri \$12.6 billion*, St. Louis Business Journal (Jan. 17, 2018) ([www.bizjournals.com/stlouis/news/2018/01/17/opioid-crisis-cost-missouri-12-6-billion.html](http://www.bizjournals.com/stlouis/news/2018/01/17/opioid-crisis-cost-missouri-12-6-billion.html)).

<sup>3</sup> Department of Veterans Affairs, Department of Veterans Affairs Opioid Prescribing Data ([www.data.va.gov/story/departments-veterans-affairs-opioid-prescribing-data](http://www.data.va.gov/story/departments-veterans-affairs-opioid-prescribing-data)) (accessed Mar. 5, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Department of Veterans Affairs: *VA Becomes First Hospital System to Release Opioid Prescribing Rates: Interactive Map Expands Transparency, Shows Opioids Dispensed Among VA Health Care Centers* (Jan. 11, 2018).

In order to better understand the progress VA has achieved through the Opioid Safety Initiative and the remaining challenges that lie ahead, I request that you provide written responses to the following questions and a briefing to my staff on this topic no later than April 5, 2018:

1. What specific steps will VA take to build on the initial success of the Opioid Safety Initiative and continue the decrease in opioid prescribing rates?
2. How will the Opioid Safety Initiative further decrease the use of long-term opioid therapy within the VA healthcare system?
3. How many veterans in the VA healthcare system who currently suffer from chronic pain issues also receive opioid therapy? If possible, please provide a breakdown of this information by age, conflict served, and geographic location. Please also provide the total number of veterans suffering from chronic pain.
4. How many veterans in the VA healthcare system who currently suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and/or traumatic brain injury (TBI) also receive opioid therapy? If possible, please provide a breakdown of this information by age, conflict served, and geographic location. Please also provide the total number of veterans suffering from PTSD/TBI.
5. How many opioid overdoses have occurred within the VA healthcare system in the last five years? If possible, please provide a breakdown of this information by each year between 2012 and 2017.
6. In 2017, VA and the Department of Defense released updated clinical practice guidelines for the management of opioid therapy for chronic pain.<sup>5</sup>
  - a. Does VA plan to update the guidelines for 2018?
  - b. In addition to the written guidelines, does VA provide any additional training for medical professionals on the management of opioid therapy for chronic pain?
7. What efforts has VA undertaken to share lessons from the Opioid Safety Initiative with private sector actors, including insurance providers and pharmacy benefit managers?

If you have any questions, please contact Hannah Berner with my Committee staff at (202) 224-5065 or [Hannah\\_Berner@hsgac.senate.gov](mailto:Hannah_Berner@hsgac.senate.gov). Please send any official correspondence

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<sup>5</sup> Department of Veterans Affairs, Department of Defense, *VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guideline for Opioid Therapy for Chronic Pain* (February 2017) ([www.healthquality.va.gov/guidelines/Pain/cot/VADoDOTCPG022717.pdf](http://www.healthquality.va.gov/guidelines/Pain/cot/VADoDOTCPG022717.pdf)).

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related to this request to Lucy Balcezak at [Lucy\\_Balcezak@hsgac.senate.gov](mailto:Lucy_Balcezak@hsgac.senate.gov). Thank you in advance for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Claire McCaskill". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Claire" being more prominent and the last name "McCaskill" following in a similar style.

Claire McCaskill  
Ranking Member

cc: Ron Johnson  
Chairman