

Statement of Ranking Member Thomas R. Carper
“Improving VA Accountability: Examining First-Hand Accounts of Department of Veterans Affairs Whistleblowers”
September 22, 2015

As prepared for delivery:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for calling this hearing today. It’s been one of my top goals during my time in the Senate to find bipartisan ways to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of our federal government and get better results for less money. One of the key ways to do that is to root out waste, fraud, and abuse.

Whistleblowers can play a key role in these efforts. They’re often the first to raise concerns and highlight instances where we can better serve the American people. Today, we’ll hear from three whistleblowers and the family member of another. Their testimony tells a powerful story about management dysfunction at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

I’m often reminding myself of my core values. 1.) Do what is right 2.) Focus on excellence in everything we do 3.) Never give up, and 4.) Treat others how we want to be treated – the Golden Rule. Without people who are willing to stand up and say something when they see something that is wrong, it would be much harder to root out waste and inefficiencies in federal programs. And in order to encourage people to stand up, we need to ensure that they will not be punished for doing so.

Our second panel will feature representatives from the VA, the VA Inspector General (VA OIG), and the U.S. Office of Special Counsel (OSC). I hope to talk with them about how they can better work within their own organizations and across government to ensure that whistleblowers are heard and protected after they speak up. Unfortunately, there is much work to do to better ensure that individuals feel free to come forward with problems they find without fear of retaliation.

I have been a long-time proponent of strengthening agency oversight by hearing from and protecting federal whistleblowers, as have a number of current and former members of this committee. I hope we can learn some valuable lessons today about the experiences some whistleblowers face. I’d also like to learn more about what we can do to better support them and improve the difficult situation they seem to face at the VA and elsewhere.

I’ve seen firsthand how hard it can be to be a whistleblower thanks to an experience that I had with a whistleblower a few years ago in Dover, Delaware. A whistleblower from the Dover Air Force Base contacted my office with information about mismanagement at the base mortuary. My office was able to help draw attention to both these issues and the retaliation the whistleblower was facing. In the end, the Office of Special Counsel investigation led to disciplinary action against several people in leadership

positions at the Base and to the reinstatement of this whistleblower and others there. I was struck by the courage of these brave whistleblowers who risked so much to right a wrong.

I know there are many more across the country and throughout the federal government who make the same brave decision to speak up every day. I take seriously the responsibility we have here in Congress to listen to them, protect them, and make sure we right the wrongs they bring to our attention.

I do, however, want to note a concern I have raised before in other hearings that some of the whistleblowers here today have retaliation claims that have not yet been substantiated, and cases that are still pending. I want to respect the independent, objective processes that Congress has set up at the Office of Special Counsel, the Merit Systems Protections Board, and elsewhere. I do have some concerns about publicly discussing cases that involve ongoing investigations and litigation.

That said, I'm glad that we have the opportunity to hear from the witnesses and appreciate them taking the time to testify before us today. I look forward to hearing from them and hope they can better inform both our work and the work of our witnesses on the second panel.

One issue that I want to raise in closing is Inspector General vacancies, and in particular the longstanding vacancy at the VA's Office of Inspector General. It is unacceptable that this important office has been without permanent leadership for close to two years. Earlier this year I joined with all of my colleagues on this Committee in sending a letter to the President urging him to fill all IG vacancies, and another specifically pointing out the importance of filling the VA IG vacancy.

Simply put: permanent leadership of the Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General is long overdue and would go a long way toward providing stable leadership and oversight of the agency. This hearing will serve as another reminder of the need to fill that vacancy.

Again, I look forward to the testimony and learning today how we can better protect whistleblowers.

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