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June 26, 2012

The Honorable Eric K. Shinseki
Secretary
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Shinseki,

I am writing to express my concern over the ability of the Department of Veterans Affairs to hire enough staff to fill the vacant mental health positions currently undermining the VA system. Specifically, recent reports from the field indicate that the VA is failing to take advantage of licensed professional mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists, who together comprise roughly 40 percent of the nation's mental health workforce.

The VA's announcement that it will hire 1,600 additional mental health clinicians was a strong step forward towards addressing the unmet mental health needs of our veterans. Also encouraging is VA's announcement that it will recruit marriage and family therapists and licensed professional mental health counselors to fill the new positions.

On April 24th, you announced that VA "has expanded its mental health services to include professionals from two additional health care fields: marriage and family therapists (MFT) and licensed professional mental health counselors (LPMHC)." Yet, that same day, several associations representing MFTs and LPMHCs received a letter from the VA Under Secretary of Health saying that "at this time there is not a need to set up a training program" for the MFT and LPMHC professions.

The VA trainee support program provides funding to place mental health professionals in VA facilities, and is designed to encourage VA service and provide a path for permanent employment. Adding MFTs and LPMHCs to the program would accomplish VA's stated goal of integration and utilize a currently under utilized pool of mental health providers.

VA has stated publicly that it expects the number of veterans seeking treatment to grow and is taking steps to publicize its treatment programs and welcome veterans from all eras into the VHA system. Yet, while the number of patients in VA facilities grows, VA staffing does not seem able to keep pace with demand. In a query of its mental health staff conducted in September of 2011, VA found that 70.6 percent of mental health staff felt their facility did not have "adequate mental health staff to meet demands for care." In the results of the query, it was noted as relevant that "[a]s of May 2011, VHA vacancy data for mental health positions showed a vacancy rate of 13.6 percent across the country."

Congress passed legislation in 2006 directing VA to hire counselors and MFTs. It took until 2010 for VA to finally establish a process for hiring these professionals. I am concerned that VA is unnecessarily prolonging a process that could significantly increase the supply of mental health professionals available to address provider shortages at VA facilities.

In order to help the Committee understand and address this shortage, please answer the following questions:

- How many mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists have been hired in VA facilities over the past three years and where are they located?
- What actions has the VA taken to accelerate the hiring of LPMHCs and MFTs?
- During a Senate Veterans Affairs Committee hearing on April 25, Deputy Under Secretary for Health, William Schoenard, stated that VA has created a task force to recruit applicants for the 1,600 new mental health positions. Are MFTs and LPMHCs part of this task force? Does the task force specifically address the hiring of these professions? If not, what is the reason?
- What is the VA doing to address misunderstandings and misinformation at the facility level regarding the ability to hire these professions?
- The VA concurred with a recommendation stated in the Inspector General's report: "Recommendation 3: We recommended that the Under Secretary for Health conduct a staffing analysis to determine if mental health staff vacancies represent a systemic issue impeding the Veterans Health Administration's ability to meet mental health timeliness goals, and if so, develop an action plan to correct the impediments." The VA stated that it would conduct an evaluation of VHA vacancy data and implement "national mental health staffing guidance." What were the results of that evaluation, and what does the guidance consist of?
- VA employs many newly-trained health professionals as clinical interns, and these interns often pursue careers within VA. Dr. Petzel has indicated that mental health counselor interns and marriage and family therapy interns are ineligible for financial stipends, even though interns from two other mental-health professions (psychology and social work) are eligible. Why this discrepancy?

Thank you for your time and consideration of this matter. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Michael H. Michaud
Ranking Democratic Member
Subcommittee on Health