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Subject: Federal Insider: Two key Senate chairmen call for new VA leadership

Two key Senate chairmen call for new VA leadership

By Joe Davidson

Veterans Affairs Secretary Robert McDonald shown in February. (AP Photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais)

Beleaguered Department of Veterans Affairs officials, still reeling from a 2014 scandal over the coverup of long patient wait times, should expect more unwanted attention after Donald Trump takes office.

Two Senate committee chairmen are urging the president-elect to pursue reform at the VA, which they said has “an urgent need to improve veteran care, promote accountability, and protect whistleblowing within the VA.”

Sen. Ron Johnson (R-Wis.), chairman of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, and Sen. Charles E. Grassley (R-Iowa), chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, urged “new leadership” at the VA in [a letter to Vice President-elect Mike Pence](#), chairman of the Trump transition team.

“Our veterans deserve the finest care. All too often, unfortunately, we learn of serious allegations of mismanagement and wrongdoing at the VA facilities across the country,” the senators wrote. “Whether it is unreasonable wait times at multiple facilities, the widespread over-prescription of highly addictive opioids, veteran suicides, misconduct by VA management, or retaliation against whistleblowers, it is clear that not all veterans are receiving the high-quality care they deserve. We are hopeful that under new leadership, the VA can embrace these principles to ensure that our nation’s veterans receive the care they deserve.”

A long series of unscrupulous acts by some VA employees and lax

management caused significant patient service problems and led to the resignation of the former VA secretary in 2014. Robert A. McDonald, the current secretary, has instituted a series of reforms that have been praised by veterans' service organizations. A [Journal of General Internal Medicine literature review](#), published in July, indicated that compared to non-VA health-care facilities in the areas of safety and effectiveness, the VA had "generally better or equal performance, with some exceptions."

The senators' recommendation for new leadership conflicts with the wishes of 20 veterans-related organizations that called on Trump to retain McDonald, saying his transformation efforts "are showing early signs of success in the form of a better veteran experience, and, if continued, we believe they have the potential to eventually make VA a model agency."

Six large veterans-service organization praised McDonald to the transition team for his "effective initiatives."

One important problem the senators cited is the VA's "cultural problem with whistleblower protection. ... Our Committees have worked closely with VA whistleblowers across the country. We have been able to identify common challenges that VA whistleblowers face when they take the courageous step to come forward and report wrongdoing. In some instances, VA whistleblowers have been subjected to retaliatory investigations and placed on administrative leave for unreasonable lengths of time."

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Grassley and Johnson said they “look forward to working with the new Administration to enact meaningful reforms that improve veteran care, expand veteran choice, hold all VA employees accountable, and enhance whistleblower protections.”

The senators said “the vast majority of VA employees are dedicated and hard-working civil servants,” but they were critical of the current administration, saying it “has shown that it is either unwilling or unable to hold employees accountable for wrongful conduct.” Grassley and Johnson urged the new administration to “work with Congress to enact additional accountability measures for all VA employees.”

That’s in line with Trump’s [campaign platform](#). It aims to “Make the VA great again by firing the corrupt and incompetent VA executives who let our veterans down.” His 10-point VA plan says he intends to “use the powers of the presidency to remove and discipline the federal employees and managers who have violated the public’s trust and failed to carry out the duties on behalf of our veterans.”

Legislation approved in 2014 allows the department to fire feds faster by weakening civil service protections for VA senior executives. Two years after President Obama signed the law, approved with bipartisan support, his administration belatedly decided it would not enforce a provision that prevented employee appeals to the full Merit Systems Protection Board. The House has approved legislation that would extend the sharply truncated appeals process to senior executives across government. The chances for enactment of that legislation probably will increase once Trump takes office.

The letter from the senators was noticeably more moderate in tone than remarks from former House speaker Newt Gingrich. In a [Washington Post Live interview](#) Friday, he used harsh language to encourage new laws that would allow expedited dismissals of VA employees.

Referring to scandals that have plagued the VA, Gingrich said, “Do you think people who kill veterans should stay in their jobs? ... [Should] we make the government union people happy and keep their jobs, people who we know broke the rules and killed veterans?”

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