

KATHY CASTOR  
14TH DISTRICT, FLORIDA

COMMITTEE ON  
ENERGY AND COMMERCE  
Subcommittee on Health  
Subcommittee on  
Energy and Power  
Subcommittee on  
Conservation and Forestry  
COMMITTEE ON THE BUDGET  
REGIONAL WHIP



**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**  
Washington, DC 20515-0914

WASHINGTON OFFICE  
205 CANNON BUILDING  
WASHINGTON, DC 20545  
(202) 225-3376

DISTRICT OFFICE  
4144 NORTH ARMENIA AVENUE  
SUITE 300  
TAMPA, FL 33607  
(813) 871-2517  
[www.castor.house.gov](http://www.castor.house.gov)

January 7, 2016

The Honorable Robert A. McDonald  
Secretary of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20420

RE: Numerous Department of Veterans Affairs problems and concerns

Dear Secretary McDonald:

It is clear that additional reforms are needed at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to ensure our veterans' records are treated with respect and that our veterans receive the care they were promised and earned. As we have seen all too often recently, the VA has not met its responsibility to our veterans on a number of fronts. Veterans' personal information has not been safeguarded with requisite care, our veterans have been forced into excessive and damaging backlog wait times for far too long, and retaliations have been made by the VA against whistleblowers for highlighting inappropriate behavior. I respectfully request that the problems and concerns be addressed immediately.

The institutional problems cannot be allowed to persist. First, according to the VA Office of Inspector General (IG), veterans who filed benefit claims at the St. Petersburg Regional Office not only experienced longer wait times but the IG found that personal information was improperly stored and the veterans information was susceptible to identity theft, an issue that has tormented many of my friends and neighbors in Tampa Bay. I have heard stories of sloppy record keeping at this office for many years and the IG report bears this out. This is unacceptable and must be addressed immediately. Please inform me of how the VA plans to correct these issues.

Second, I have recently reviewed disturbing media reports on VA accountability and the security of our veterans' sensitive private medical information. The reports of patient privacy violations at the VA have occurred in areas that impact my neighbors in the Tampa Bay area. According to a recent NPR article that references ProPublica analysis (article attached) of the VA, there have been more than 10,000 privacy violations by employees, and contractors at the VA medical centers, clinics and pharmacies since 2011. This is simply unacceptable and I request an update on the remedies the VA is pursuing to ensure our veterans' personal medical information is kept private.

Finally, the findings of an investigation into whether whistleblowers were retaliated against at the VA facility in Phoenix, Arizona are disheartening. The memorandum to you from Mike Culpepper, Co-Chair of the Office of Accountability Review, dated October 30, 2014, recommended "appropriate administrative action" should be taken against three Department of Veterans Affairs supervisors for retaliation against two individuals who came forward with their concerns about conditions for veterans. Please provide me with an update, consistent with your policies and procedures, on any actions taken to penalize those who perpetrated these alleged retaliations.

It is further reported that since the findings have come to light the VA has entered into confidential settlements with both of the whistleblowers. However, it is also reported that the VA has not taken any administrative action against the three supervisors found to be in violation by the Office of Accountability Review. If this is the case, it is highly problematic. Our veterans have earned the highest quality of care and the whistleblowers, unfortunately, have ended up being the best means to help bring to light concerns and even wrongdoing that stand in the way of this high quality of care at the VA. If reports are true, that is certainly the case of these two. I am requesting an update on the progress of the administrative actions as apparently recommended by the Office of Accountability Review.

My congressional colleagues and I have worked hard to increase resources and accountability for the VA to benefit our veterans. Anything that can ensure the efficient use of those resources by your agency should be encouraged. Sensitive material has to be secure. As you know, these brave men and women have earned the right to quality and timely care from the VA through blood and sweat and it is our duty to ensure this happens. Allowing retaliation against whistleblowers without punishment could have a chilling effect on individuals coming forward in the future and certainly would not fit in the category of encouraging employee input.

It was reported recently that you may be visiting the University of South Florida and the Tampa Bay area in the near future. That may be an opportune time to meet with me and other colleagues to discuss what the VA will do to remedy these problems. Thank you for your attention to this matter and your timely response. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me or Kevin Karpay at 202-225-3376.

Sincerely,



Kathy Castor  
United States Representative  
Florida - District 14