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April 27, 2020

The Honorable Michael J. Missal
Inspector General
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Office of Inspector General
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Mr. Missal:

I write to request that the Office of the Inspector General investigate reports of shortages of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and COVID-19 testing supplies at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and VA's plan to procure these supplies as this pandemic progresses.

I am deeply disturbed by reports published last week that VA employees are not being provided with the appropriate PPE to perform their jobs safely.¹ In addition to the media reports, five labor unions representing VA workers wrote a letter to VA leadership informing them of the shortage of PPE and the lack of testing and paid leave for employees.² VA described "shortages in facemasks and N95 respirators" and "challenges procuring adequate supplies of these items" in an internal memo, while at the same time assuring Congress and veterans that there was no shortage.³

As of this week, there are more than 3,500 Veterans Health Administration (VHA) employees quarantined due to potential exposure to the virus, more than 1,900 who have tested positive, and 20 who have died. Without access to appropriate PPE for VA employees this situation will surely worsen. I am also concerned by reports that VA may be underreporting

¹ Jennifer Steinhauer, "V.A. Health Care Workers Balk at Safety Practices," *The New York Times*, April 15, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/15/us/politics/coronavirus-veterans-health-care.html?searchResultPosition=1>; Ben Kesling, "Department of Veterans Affairs Supply Chain Interrupted by Pandemic," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/departments-of-veterans-affairs-supply-chain-interrupted-by-pandemic-11587144757>.

Lisa Rein, "VA health chief acknowledges a shortage of protective gear for its hospital workers," *The Washington Post*, April 25, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/va-health-chief-acknowledges-a-shortage-of-protective-gear-for-its-hospital-workers/2020/04/24/4c1bcd5e-84bf-11ea-ae26-989cfce1c7c7_story.html.

² From American Federation of Government Employees, et al, to VA Secretary Wilkie and VA Executive-in-Charge Dr. Stone, April 13, 2020, in authors' possession.

³ From Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Operations and Management (10N), to Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) Directors (10N1-23), "Updated: Coronavirus (COVID-19) Facemask and N95 Respirator Use," April 7, 2020.

numbers related to COVID-19.⁴ It is imperative that VA provide accurate and detailed information to Congress. Thus far, VA has avoided Congressional requests for information and documents by requiring approval from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) before their release. This Administration should not be allowed to use the bureaucratic process to subvert oversight by a coequal branch of government.

In March, near the beginning of the pandemic in the United States, your office conducted a timely and informative inspection of VHA's pandemic readiness at 237 VA facilities around the country.⁵ Of the 54 facilities inspected for "Adequacy of Supplies and Equipment," 33 reported inadequate supplies—an alarming 61%. Your report also found that "facility leaders expressed concerns related to supplies...[and] also acknowledged low inventory of personal protective equipment for staff."

It is clear that VA failed to heed the warnings of your March report related to shortfalls of equipment. Instead, VA replied that their system "is equipped with essential items and supplies to handle an influx of coronavirus cases and is monitoring the status of those items daily," and that they were "coordinating with HHS regarding VHA prioritization of Personal Protective Equipment." Considering that there is now wide-spread reporting on PPE shortages, it is deeply concerning that VA has not provided detailed information on PPE or COVID-19 testing shortages and how exactly they are coordinating with HHS and FEMA to mitigate these shortages.

I request that you immediately commence an investigation into the VA's supply of PPE and testing supplies, and into the conduct of VA leadership to deduce any instances of fraud, waste, abuse or mismanagement. VA employees have risen heroically to save veterans and non-veterans from this terrible illness. These health care heroes have been poorly-served by VA not providing them the proper equipment. I request your action to ensure that VA is accurately tracking, reporting, and acting upon supply and equipment shortages.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Richard Blumenthal".

Richard Blumenthal
United States Senate

⁴ Leo Shane, "Internal memos call into question VA's still-rising coronavirus count," *Military Times*, April 14, 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2020/04/14/internal-memos-call-into-question-vas-still-rising-coronavirus-count/>

⁵ Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Inspector General, "OIG Inspection of Veterans Health Administration's COVID-19 Screening Processes and Pandemic Readiness: March 19-24, 2020," <https://www.va.gov/oig/publications/report-summary.asp?id=4780> (accessed April 23, 2020).