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August 19, 2021

The Honorable Denis R. McDonough
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough:

In the last 20 years, an estimated 800,000 U.S. servicemembers served in Afghanistan to oust the Taliban from power, eliminate the threat from al-Qaeda, and bring Osama bin Laden to justice. As the United States withdraws its military from Afghanistan following a negotiated agreement with the Taliban, it is reasonable to think that many of those military veterans who served in that conflict would have strong thoughts and feelings about their role, and may need additional support or resources to properly deal with the war's end.

Our brave soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines have built tremendous bonds with Afghanistan and its people through their sacrifices. Servicemembers have given years of their lives to stabilizing and strengthening that country, training and serving alongside Afghan military and civilians, and working to make Afghanistan a stable and peaceful partner to the United States. Our military men and women, and their families, have given their loved ones and comrades years of their lives, and often their future peace of mind, to this cause. For many, the losses they have endured have been bearable because of the bonds they formed with individual Afghans and the hope they had fostered that their lives would be better because of those sacrifices. As the Taliban takes power in Kabul and across Afghanistan, we are seeing veterans work frantically to cut through bureaucratic red tape to help our Afghan allies evacuate the country and preserve that hope for the future. We know that the worsening situation for our Afghan allies will negatively impact many of our military veterans, and it is our duty to provide adequate support for those veterans as our country grapples with the fallout from our withdrawal from Afghanistan.

As a long-time member of the Veterans' Affairs Committees in the House of Representatives and now in the Senate, including as chairman and ranking member in the Senate, I have focused on making certain our veterans have access to the care and resources they need to successfully transition out of the military and go on to be successful in their civilian lives. Recently, I led the effort to pass the *Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act* to improve the ability of VA to deliver mental health care to our veterans and to expand innovative solutions for preventing suicide both in the VA and among partners in the community. I am pleased that the VA has committed to improving mental health and suicide prevention for our veterans as its top clinical priority. Congress and nearly every major organization serving veterans have also made this a top priority, so understanding your

department's planning and programming around specific aspects of this issue helps us all align our separate work to improve outcomes for veterans.

We know the Veterans Crisis Line (VCL) is already seeing an 11 percent spike in calls as of August 15th, and numerous veteran serving organizations are working to meet the expanding need to support veterans during this extremely tense time. I would like to understand VA's involvement and actions so far in planning for the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, how it assessed the need for additional mental health resources, and how those resources have been put into place. Please provide answers to the following questions by September 13, 2021.

1. Since the decision was made to withdraw all U.S. troops from Afghanistan in 2021, how has VA coordinated with the Departments of Defense and State, the White House, and with any other agencies on potential impacts to VA and the benefits and services it provides? Please provide a general timeline of this coordination and the potential impacts that were identified.
2. Did the administration consult with VA on the impact to veterans prior to finalizing any withdrawal plans?
3. What forecasts did VA make on the impact the withdrawal would have on demand for VA mental health services? What steps has VA taken to prepare for the forecasted impacts?
4. What steps has VA taken to prepare for the increased call volume to the VCL, and what is the expected timeline for VA's response to this increased demand?
5. What specific messages have been tailored for VCL respondents, and how is the VCL working to properly handle this particular crisis that is negatively impacting many veterans?
6. What efforts has VA made to reach out to veteran serving and other community organizations to bolster their work in assisting veterans through this crisis?

Our military servicemembers fought honorably to accomplish every mission their country asked of them, and as veterans, many of them continue to fight for the safety and well-being of our Afghan allies. How the United States concludes our involvement in Afghanistan will have lasting impacts on both our Afghan allies and on the brave men and women whose honor will forever be entwined with the fate of the country in which they fought. The VA has an important role to play in how our country ends this war and deals with its aftermath. I will work to make certain we do all we can to see that this war is ended responsibly and its aftermath is dealt with compassionately.

Sincerely,



Jerry Moran
Ranking Member