

United States Senate

SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6400

(202) 224-5364

November 6, 2019

The Honorable Robert Wilkie
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20420

RE: Scams affecting America's Veterans

Dear Secretary Wilkie:

We are concerned that America's Veterans are being targeted by unscrupulous scammers who are seeking to rob them of their life savings and defraud them of the benefits they have earned in service to our country. It is imperative that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) take action to alert our Veterans to the risk of these scams, and what can be done to combat them.

Studies show that Veterans are disproportionately affected by scams. An AARP study from 2017 found that Veterans were twice as likely as non-Veterans to lose money to a scam. The same report found that nearly 80 percent of Veterans had reported being targeted by a scam that related to their Veteran status.

Several types of schemes are used to steal money or personal identifiable information from Veterans. For example, scammers may contact Veterans pretending to collect money to help other Veterans, pretend to "update their file" to obtain their personal identifiable information, or inform veterans that they qualify for a "secret" government program that requires an initial payment. Others charge inappropriate fees for helping Veterans apply for the benefits they have earned, or swindle them out of their life savings in aid and attendance scams where victims are coached into restructuring their assets in a way that could be financially detrimental and cause issues with qualifying for benefits down the line.

In October 2019 Government Accountability Office (GAO) released a report that examined financial exploitation of Veterans eligible for benefits and identified actions the VA can take to better protect these Veterans. According to GAO, although various components within the VA receive reports of potential fraud or exploitation, the agency does not centrally collect or analyze this information to assess the prevalence of scams, inform outreach efforts, or help law enforcement pursue scammers. GAO recommended that VA systematically collect and assess information from its components on potential financial exploitation. While the agency concurred in principle, it proposed an alternative approach to develop a referral process to the Federal Trade Commission, publicize the process to beneficiaries and make this information available to VA's Office of the Inspector General to aid in investigations. GAO noted that while this would be a positive step, it would not fully address the underlying issue.

As scammers become more sophisticated in their efforts, it is imperative that VA play an active role in combatting financial exploitation posed by scammers. Veterans and their families have a right to expect that the nation they served will fight to protect them from such unscrupulous tactics. With that in mind, we request responses to the following questions:

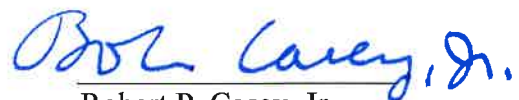
1. Has the VA examined the extent to which America's Veterans have been victimized by the type of scams described above, or other forms of financial fraud? If so, to what extent are these scams deliberately structured to target Veterans?
2. How is the VA working with federal and state agencies and stakeholder groups to protect Veterans from financial frauds?
3. What has the VA done to educate Veterans and their families about these frauds, and the steps they can take to combat them?
4. How will the VA's proposed approach in response to GAO's recommendation provide the agency with the ability to assess the prevalence of scams targeting Veterans and inform outreach and education efforts?
5. What plans does the VA have in place to increase these efforts, and what further legislative or regulatory authority does the VA need to do so?

It is critical that Congress fully understands how our nation's Veterans are affected by financial fraud, and what Veterans Affairs is doing to protect them. We look forward to your prompt response to this inquiry on or before Thursday, November 21, 2019. Should you have any questions, please have your staff contact Lara Rosner on Senator Collins' staff at lara_rosner@aging.senate.gov, or Rashage Green on Senator Casey's staff at Rashage_Green@aging.senate.gov.

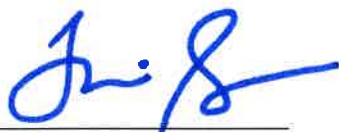
Sincerely,



Susan M. Collins
Chairman



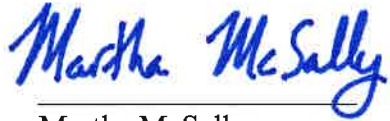
Robert P. Casey, Jr.
Ranking Member



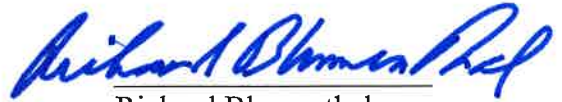
Tim Scott
United States Senator



Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator



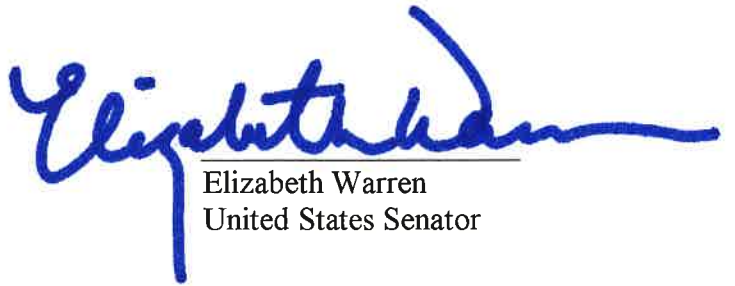
Martha McSally
United States Senator



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



Marco Rubio
United States Senator



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



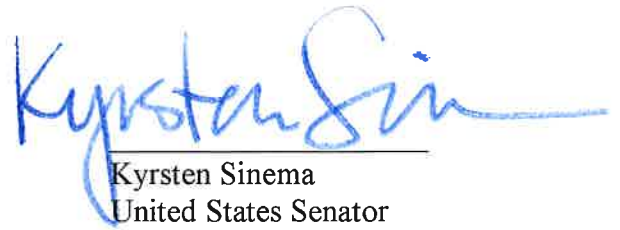
Josh Hawley
United States Senator



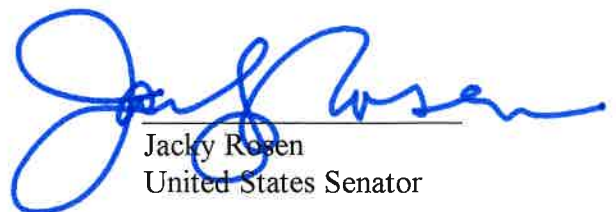
Doug Jones
United States Senator



Rick Scott
United States Senator



Kyrsten Sinema
United States Senator



Jacky Rosen
United States Senator