

NOTE: The notice is listed in Appendix D at the end of this volume. An original was not available for verification of the content of this letter.

Statement on the Death of Willie T. Barrow *March 12, 2015*

Reverend Willie T. Barrow was a civil rights icon and a Chicago institution, a “Little Warrior” in pursuit of justice for all God’s children. In 1936, when she was just 12 years old, Reverend Barrow demanded to be let on to her all-White schoolbus in Texas, and the fight for equality she joined that day would become the cause of her life. She marched with Dr. King on Washington and in Selma. She stood up for labor rights and women’s rights. She made one of the first pieces of the AIDS Memorial Quilt and proudly welcomed LGBT brothers and sisters to the movement she helped lead.

Nowhere was Reverend Barrow’s impact felt more than in our hometown of Chicago. Through Operation Breadbasket, the Rainbow

PUSH Coalition, and her beloved Vernon Park Church, she never stopped doing all she could to make her community a better place. To Michelle and me, she was a constant inspiration, a lifelong mentor, and a very dear friend. I was proud to count myself among the more than 100 men and women she called her “Godchildren” and worked hard to live up to her example. I still do.

Michelle and I are deeply saddened by Reverend Barrow’s passing, but we take comfort in the knowledge that our world is a far better place because she was a part of it. Our thoughts and prayers are with Reverend Barrow’s family and with all those who loved her as we did.

Remarks Following a Roundtable Discussion on Veterans Health Care at the Carl T. Hayden Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Phoenix, Arizona *March 13, 2015*

Well, I want to thank everybody who is here for what’s been an excellent conversation, not just about this particular facility or this particular State, but how do we make sure that the VA is working for every single veteran who’s put on a uniform and has made enormous sacrifices on behalf of our country’s security and freedom.

We all know that there have been significant problems at this facility, that the kind of cooking the books and unwillingness to face up to the fact that veterans were not being adequately served went on too long, and as a consequence, we didn’t fix what needed to be fixed.

What I’m glad about is since Bob McDonald, working with Deputy Secretary Sloan Gibson—have been able to do is to start making some progress and chipping away at the problems here. And we’ve brought in a new team that has been tackling these issues to make

sure that wait times for scheduling, access to providers is greatly improved.

But what we know is that there is still more work to do. And this discussion allowed us to hone in on some problems that continue to crop up, and as a consequence, will allow us to fix them.

I want to thank the Members of Congress who are here. All of them have expressed great interest in how the Choice Act is being implemented. This legislation that Congress moved forward provided a lot of resources for us to be able to hire more clinicians and to beef up the services that are provided in many of the existing VA centers. But what it also did was, for folks who have difficulty getting to a VA facility, it gave them the possibility of getting a private sector provider for their care.

There have been some concerns expressed about whether that information is getting out to veterans as effectively as it should. There are

some specific issues of implementation that Senator McCain, Senator Flake, and Congresswoman Sinema and all the Members of Congress here described. What I've committed to is making sure that we implement the Choice Act promptly and effectively and that some of the concerns that have been raised are addressed. And I know that Bob is committed to that same thing.

Some of the other issues that were expressed of concern revolved around mental health issues and suicide prevention. And this is an area that there's been great bipartisan work on, but there's still more to do. And I think there were some very positive suggestions that were received about how we can make progress there.

And the final issue that I heard a lot about today is the need to restore trust and confidence in the VA system. Trust is one of those things that you can lose real quick and then it takes some time to build. The good news is, is that there are outstanding folks here at this VA and all the VAs across the country who are deserving of trust. But it's important that veterans know that somebody has got their backs and that if there are problems that we're not being defensive about them, we're not hiding them. We're working together with the outstanding USOs and other organizations around the table to fix them.

I think that process has begun, but we've got more work to do to make sure that there is a culture of customer service and there's enthusiasm and excitement and a sense of purpose and mission about serving our veterans. Because that's the kind of attitude that they brought to bear when they were out in theaters of war and serving our country, and that's what they deserve every single day up and down the chain.

So I'm very grateful to everybody for the input that they've provided. Last point I would make: Although we spent a lot of time talking about areas that needed improvement, al-

though we are very pleased that we've got an outstanding former CEO from the private sector as well as a veteran in Joe Robles, who's going to be heading up our Advisory Committee to address some of these issues and work with Bob and Sloan around what we're calling MyVA, although we know that more problems will crop up because that's inevitable in an organization this large, every veteran who I talked to here today emphasized that when it came to the actual care that people were receiving once in the system, it was outstanding; that there were great doctors, great nurses, great staff who care deeply about our veterans. And obviously, a lot of those doctors, nurses, and staff are veterans themselves and understand the sacrifices that our veterans have made.

So there are systems that have to be fixed; there's management that has to continue to drive a renewed sense of purpose inside the VA. But we can't ignore that every single day, the VA is doing some outstanding work to provide care to our veterans. And that's not, I think, spin; that's something that we heard directly from a lot of veterans around this table.

And we want to thank everybody at the VA who's been doing their job and doing it well, because just the fact that there have been a few bad apples, some mistakes that have been made, systems that aren't designed to get the job done, I don't want that to detract from the outstanding work of a lot of people inside this organization.

So thank you very much, everybody, for what was a terrific conversation and your outstanding input. And I want to especially thank the Members of Congress who are here who, in a bipartisan fashion, have been constructive, stayed on the case, and have allocated resources to make sure that this problem gets fixed.

Thank you, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:16 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to Josue "Joe" Robles, Jr., Chairman, MyVA Advisory Committee.