

we see in the case of these appointments, the Justice Department has aided and abetted him.

Praise today to the Supreme Court for forcing the President to confront the errors of his ways, for enforcing the constitutional structure that protects our freedom, and maybe cause him to modify that statement he made earlier this year that:

“When Congress won’t, I will, because I’ve got a pen . . . and I’ve got a telephone . . .”

I yield the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Louisiana.

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Mr. VITTER. Mr. President, as we all know, the Department of Veterans Affairs, the VA, is in shambles. Two national reports this week have highlighted the fact that bureaucratic ineptitude and incompetence seem to be the norm there. Unfortunately, reports that surfaced out of Phoenix which led to the resignation of Secretary Shinseki do not seem limited to Arizona.

I wish to talk about where we are nationally with this scandal, and also specific instances that have come out of Louisiana I have learned about working directly with whistleblowers and working directly with families of veterans whom I am very concerned about who are examples of this same sort of abuse.

On Monday, the head of the agency that investigates whistleblower complaints in the Federal Government, Carolyn Lerner, sent a blistering letter to President Obama stating that the VA Office of the Medical Inspector has repeatedly undermined legitimate whistleblowers by confirming their allegations of wrongdoing but dismissing them as having no impact on patient care.

Lerner’s letter lists numerous cases where whistleblowers reported numerous failings at the VA, including examples where drinking water at the VA facility at Grand Junction, CO, was tainted with elevated levels of Legionella bacteria, which can cause a form of pneumonia, and standard maintenance and cleaning procedures not being performed at the facility.

Also, in Montgomery, AL, a VA pulmonologist portrayed past test readings as current results in more than 1,200 patient files, “likely resulting in inaccurate patient health information being recorded.”

In these cases, among many others, VA whistleblowers brought the information to the special counsel, an independent Federal entity charged with enforcing whistleblower protection laws. The special counsel passed it along to the Office of the Medical Inspector, but that VA medical inspector concluded the hospital’s failings, while accurately reported by the whistleblowers, didn’t threaten veterans health or safety, even when the VA in-

spector general had concluded that similar faults compromised care in other cases.

This is deeply troubling and severely cripples any belief that the VA is in any way capable of fixing its deep-seated problems on its own.

My colleague, Senator COBURN of Oklahoma, whom I have worked with closely in dealing with many of these VA problems, also released his oversight report on the Department entitled “Friendly Fire: Death, Delay, and Dismay at the VA.” To say his report is troubling is quite an understatement. Some of the key findings I found most troubling in the report were these: the fact that there seems to be a perverse culture, his report said, within the Department where veterans are not always the priority and data and employees are manipulated to maintain an appearance that all is well.

In many cases it also seems bad employees are rewarded with bonuses and paid leave, while whistleblowers, health care providers, even veterans and their families are subjected to bullying, sexual harassment, abuse, and neglect.

Senator COBURN’s report also highlights criminal activity by VA employees, vast amounts of waste at the VA, the fact that the VA actually made waiting lists worse, and the VA Committee, led by BERNIE SANDERS, largely ignored these warnings and delay. That committee, under Senator SANDERS, has only held two oversight hearings in the last 4 years.

As I said, this is a national scandal. These are national problems. The two reports I alluded to are national reports. But I know from my work in Louisiana that they have consequences, and that similar cases exist in Louisiana. I have been deeply involved in a couple that I wish to highlight.

First, the Overton Brooks scandal in Shreveport, LA. A whistleblower came forward to my office with very troubling information regarding the VA hospital in Shreveport called Overton Brooks. The whistleblower is a licensed clinical social worker there, and he accused that VA facility of the following: maintaining a secret wait list and manipulating the official electronic wait list; using gaming strategies to manipulate reported wait times—for example, holding appointments without scheduling them until capacity opens or entering into the system that the patient requested an out-of-date appointment when that just wasn’t true; providing group therapy appointments to mental health patients, and counting these group sessions as an appointment with a primary care provider, which they were clearly not.

These aren’t just allegations. I have also personally seen emails the whistleblower provided, and that has shown that this secret list could contain up to 2,700 veterans. It also seems to confirm that, while waiting for appointments, 37 of those veterans died.

Since hearing these allegations, I have sent a letter demanding a full investigation into Overton Brooks to the inspector general of the VA, and I have confirmed that that is happening. That absolutely is moving forward.

No veteran who served this country should be put on any secret waiting list. At a time when we are learning more and more about rampant mismanagement at the VA across the country, any internal allegations such as that should be taken very seriously and clearly investigated.

That brings me to the second case I have personally dealt with and learned about in Louisiana, this case out of the New Orleans area.

Gwen Moity Nolan was the daughter of a distinguished veteran. She came to one of my recent townhall meetings in New Orleans, and she explained to me personally that her dad passed away in 2011 while a patient at the VA hospital in New Orleans, allegedly in part due to delayed and poor care at the facility.

She described the medical treatment there as poor, and that her father’s doctor had a terrible attitude and regularly refused to show up at the hospital in key situations.

She requested that information from the VA, including information regarding a supposed investigation into the case of her father, be given to her.

Her dad had passed. What she most wanted was to be sure the VA got it—to be sure the VA in New Orleans took some remedial action to correct the situation. Her case was done. Her case was done in two ways: First of all, tragically, her father was dead. Her father was passed. Secondly, she brought a legal action against the VA, and that was settled for a substantial sum of money which she received, and she is not disputing that or reopening that. That is done. But she wanted to know that these problems have been addressed.

On June 3 I sent a letter to the Acting Secretary of the VA, Sloan Gibson, demanding this information and the steps the VA has taken to correct what went wrong.

After the New Orleans VA responded by saying “patient privacy laws prohibit us from discussing specific patient information,” I sent another letter with the pertinent constituent’s privacy release form. The patient is dead. The daughter will sign any release form they want. This was clearly stonewalling to avoid giving us appropriate information.

Unfortunately, the VA responded that they cannot share this information with my office unless very specific criteria are met. Guess what. They didn’t think it was relevant to list the specific criteria we need to meet. Again, more pure stonewalling.

This information is extremely important, and I am continuing to fight to get my constituents and myself this information about if and how the New Orleans VA fixed these problems. I will

be demanding a meeting as soon as possible with the head of the New Orleans VA hospital so I can answer those questions directly, and that person had better not stonewall me to my face. That will have very negative consequences. We are setting up that meeting. That meeting will happen, and I will be following up on this New Orleans case.

Similarly, I am following up on the Shreveport case that came to light because of the whistleblower. I will be in Shreveport tomorrow, meeting with two significant people directly involved in these issues—one an official at the VA; the second, someone who has come with additional information to confirm the fears, claims, and concerns of the original whistleblower. So I will be having those meetings in Shreveport tomorrow.

Again, these Louisiana cases that I have been personally involved in underscore the serious scandal at the VA. Every community has these cases. Every State has these cases. Every Senator—Republican, Democrat, Independent—has these cases. We need to fix these to properly honor our veterans. We need to ensure that this sort of abuse—in some cases, fraud and dishonesty—to the great detriment of our veterans never happens again.

Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mrs. MURRAY. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. BOOKER). Without objection, it is so ordered.

IMMIGRATION REFORM

Mrs. MURRAY. Mr. President, almost exactly 1 year ago to this day, all of the Members of this Senate came to this Chamber for what each of us understood was a historic vote because after years and even decades of debate and discussion, a small group of bipartisan Senators—Members from different backgrounds, different States, and certainly different philosophies—came together to reach an agreement on landmark legislation, a bill that would truly change the lives of millions of Americans. They had reached a deal that would significantly boost our economy, make every one of our communities fundamentally safer, and help millions of men and women pursue the American dream. But most of all, it was a deal that showed the United States was still capable of adapting, improving, and striving for perfection.

Still, the deal was not perfect. After all, it was a compromise, and once it was reached, it had to survive incredible scrutiny throughout the committee process and then during the floor consideration. But somehow it made it through.

So 1 year ago this week when each Member of the Senate came to the

Chamber, we did something we don't normally do: We honored an old Senate tradition and actually cast our votes from our desks. That night, we finally passed comprehensive immigration reform through the Senate. I well remember the optimism we all shared that night. After years of trying, we had finally passed—with votes from both Republicans and Democrats—legislation that would finally start to fix our broken immigration system. It would strengthen our borders, support our businesses and, most importantly, provide a real path to citizenship for the millions of undocumented immigrants who are forced to live in the shadows as Americans in all but name. The Congressional Budget Office even estimated that the Senate bill would grow our economy and reduce the deficit by nearly \$1 trillion over the next 2 decades.

We sent the bill to the House of Representatives knowing the path forward there might not be easy, but we heard from Speaker of the House JOHN BOEHNER, majority leader ERIC CANTOR, and dozens of other Members from both sides of the aisle that they also knew immigration reform had to happen in this Congress.

Well, since then we have watched and we have waited as the Speaker and House Republicans simply refuse week after week, month after month to take up the Senate bill and move this process forward. For a full year we have witnessed exactly what it looks like when Congress simply fails to do its job for the American people.

Our broken immigration system is not a hypothetical problem. This isn't an obscure, philosophical disagreement over the role of government. This is an issue that has real, tangible consequences for millions of Americans. While America has watched House Republicans fail to act for a full year, we have seen some of those consequences up close.

Since the Senate passed immigration reform, tens of thousands of people—many of them women and children—have been senselessly deported from this country and separated from their families for no reason other than their undocumented status.

Businesses large and small have begged Members of the House to pass reform, including tech companies that need to hire the best and brightest from around the world and agricultural businesses that desperately need a stable workforce.

Now we are seeing hundreds of unaccompanied young children along our country's southern border. Many of these children are fleeing horrific gang violence in their home countries. They are desperately seeking safety and a new life in the United States. But because of our broken immigration laws, we are nearly helpless to respond and live up to our Nation's global reputation as a place of safety and fairness and freedom. Although these children broke our immigration laws, they are

not criminals. They are simply coming to our country to escape violence at home and strive for a better life in America.

It is not only along our southern border where our immigration system is hurting families and hurting communities. In my home State of Washington I have heard from hundreds of families and businesses that have been directly impacted by this broken system, businesses such as West Sound Lumber Company on Orcas Island. It is a small sawmill that has been owned by the Helsell family for more than four decades. West Sound Lumber is only able to keep its doors open because of one young man—Benjamin Nunez-Marquez. He goes by “Ben.” Ben is an undocumented immigrant from Mexico, and he arrived on Orcas Island more than a decade ago. He has become a cherished member of that community and an expert sawyer. The Helsells will tell you that they would have to close down if they lost Ben, and that possibility nearly became a reality when Ben was randomly stopped by an immigration official while he was taking an elderly neighbor to a doctor's appointment out of town. Although he posed no danger to his community, the Department of Homeland Security scheduled him for deportation, which was only narrowly avoided this year after I took his case directly to the Secretary of Homeland Security and the Seattle Times told Ben's story on its front page.

We should not be kicking people like Ben Nunez-Marquez out of this country. We should welcome him, treat him as a human being, and give him an opportunity to become a citizen in the country he loves—our country.

Senseless deportations are not the only symptom of our broken immigration laws. Just this year local headlines and television reports in Washington State have revealed very concerning treatment of undocumented detainees at the Northwest Detention Center. That treatment led to a widely publicized hunger strike and protest in communities across my State.

This is simply unacceptable. We must demand better than an immigration system that leaves men and women whose only crime is pursuit of the American dream to be locked up, abused, and discarded over the border. These problems are not new, and they are not going away.

Throughout this year we have heard that House Republicans will have a window of opportunity to act on immigration reform. Well, we are in that window now. Republican primaries are behind us and the general election is months away, but that window is quickly closing. The pressure is on House Republicans, and millions of Americans across the country are hoping they do the right thing. The time to act is now.

I think it is time to hope for the best but also plan for the worst. President Obama has made it clear that he is