

The Senator from Connecticut.

### VETERANS SERVICES

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Mr. President, my thanks to Senator THUNE for yielding and the Presiding Officer for presiding over the balance of the day.

I am here with sadness—not for the first time and, tragically, not for the last, I fear—because I am here to speak to the decimation and destruction of veterans services ongoing in real time, right before our eyes, affecting real people in their daily lives. And it is a tragedy and a travesty because the people affected are our Nation's heroes, whom we all say we respect, but in practice, right now, Elon Musk and Donald Trump have launched an assault to degrade and denigrate.

Donald Trump has called veterans suckers. Elon Musk shows the same kind of disrespect in the cuts, in hiring freezes, and in reductions in amounts of research—a panoply, a tsunami, of cuts in both resources and workers that are essential to the VA's functions in providing healthcare as well as PACT Act benefits that veterans have earned. They deserve them without delay. And this assault on veterans is unprecedented in our Nation's history.

We had a hearing this morning in the VA Committee on various pieces of legislation, some of them probably positive in the effects that they may have if we pass them. I have cosponsored some of them and will support others. But their meaning and effect will be absolutely eviscerated if these cuts—including 80,000 workers in addition to the 2,400 already fired—are, in fact, discharged in the future.

The plan that the Secretary of the VA has stated—it is his word, "plan"—is to fire 80,000 workers. It is his goal. He said it in an interview, and I ask unanimous consent that that interview be printed in the RECORD.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

[From Fox News, Mar. 11, 2025]

CHANGES THAT ACTUALLY HELP OUR VETERANS: VA SECRETARY DEFENDS PROPOSED 15% WORKFORCE REDUCTION

(By Deirdre Heavey)

Veterans Affairs Secretary Doug Collins has been steadfast in his commitment to shake up the department. And, despite firing at least 2,400 employees, Collins pledges to maintain the VA's commitment to preserving and improving healthcare benefits for veterans.

"VA's biggest problem is that its bureaucracy and inefficiencies are getting in the way of customer convenience and service to veterans. As I have said before, we owe American veterans and hundreds of thousands of amazing employees solutions. And mark my words, that is what we will deliver," Collins said in a video posted on X last week.

Collins said the VA dismissals are part of President Donald Trump's commitment to making government more efficient and effective, in conjunction with Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). The VA announced that last month's personnel moves will save more than \$83 million

annually, and they will "redirect all of those resources back toward health care, benefits and services for VA beneficiaries."

Collins, who has faced criticism for his proposed 15% workforce reduction, confirmed the VA's goal to cut 80,000 jobs during a "Fox & Friends" interview with Brian Kilmeade on Monday.

"Please, before Democrats or anybody else start on this path, this is going to be a deliberative process that's going to take some time that's going to include career VA employees. It's going to include senior executives. It's going to include all across, even bringing in people if need be, to take a look at: are we being efficient?" Collins told Kilmeade.

Collins has shut down criticism from the mainstream media and Democrats who have slammed VA cuts, reminding Kilmeade on Monday that operational issues have long plagued the VA.

"Let's all agree on something that for the past 10 years, the GAO has reported that the VA healthcare has been at a high-risk. In other words, they're on the high-risk list for not only the possibility of fraud, waste and abuse, but also in patient quality, patient care. This has been going on for 10 years. It's interesting to me that they're looking at wait times. These are things that have preceded me coming in. I've been here for weeks, but it's interesting that there's no solutions being proposed," Collins said.

Veterans have reported poor healthcare conditions at the VA for decades, including long wait times, delayed care, slow processing times and corruption. While the Trump administration's VA has only investigated 2% of their contracts so far, Collins said they have already identified 600 non-mission-critical or duplicate agreements to save almost \$1 billion. Collins said that money can be reinvested into making "changes that actually help our veterans."

"The money we're saving by eliminating non-mission critical and duplicative contracts is money we're going to redirect to veterans facing healthcare benefits and services, resulting in massive improvements in customer service and convenience. Improving services to the veterans is exactly why the VA exists. That is what everyone—Congress, the media and VA employees—should be focused on," Collins said.

Collins has emphasized there will be no cuts to healthcare or benefits for veterans.

"We're going to accomplish this without making cuts to healthcare or benefits to veterans and VA beneficiaries. VA will always fulfill its duty to provide veterans, families, caregivers and survivors the healthcare and benefits they have earned. That's a promise. And while we conduct our review, VA will continue to hire for more than 300,000 mission-critical positions to ensure healthcare and benefits for VA beneficiaries are not impacted," Collins said.

Despite Collins' reassurances, Democrats have slammed the Trump administration and DOGE for VA cuts. House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries, D-N.Y., led a press conference with fellow Democrats on the issue last week at the U.S. Capitol.

"Why lay off veterans? I mean, 30% of the federal workforce is veterans, including a lot of people who've been laid off at the CFPB. Can you at least show some compassion to veterans?" Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., told Fox News Digital following a meeting with Consumer Financial Protection Bureau employees who were impacted by federal workforce reductions.

"They're going to gut the Department of Veterans Affairs, jeopardizing the health and well-being of millions of veterans," Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., said at a rally in Wisconsin on Friday.

"Cutting the VA and some of the proposals I've seen are going to hurt service to veterans. So let's agree that that's a bad idea. Bipartisan. It's a bad idea to do that," Sen. Elissa Slotkin, D-Mich., told NBC's "Meet the Press" on Sunday.

"I go to the VA myself, so I see every day the waiting lists, the long lines to get care, how long it takes to get an appointment. All of that is going to get worse," Rep. Seth Moulton, D-Mass., told MSNBC on Saturday.

Veterans have been speaking out against the proposed VA cuts as well. Veterans are organizing a protest against VA cuts and "Project 2025" on Friday, March 14, in Washington, D.C., and at state capitals across the country.

VoteVets, a progressive political action committee, released a memo last week outlining the "extensive damage in the department's ability to process and pay out benefits." However, Collins said firing non-essential employees and reevaluating contracts is how the Trump administration is "finally going to give the veterans what they want."

"The VA has been a punching bag among veterans, Congress and the media for decades. Things need to change. We owe America's veterans and the hundreds and thousands of excellent VA employees solutions. For many years, veterans have been asking for a more efficient, accountable and transparent VA. This administration is finally going to give the veterans what they want," Collins said.

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Mr. President, but we did learn in this legislative hearing that, in fact, there is no plan. The 80,000-worker target for firing is in the absence of any plan. It is the target. It is the goal. It is the intention: Fire now, plan later. No plan, no metrics, no methodology, no strategy for right-sizing the VA.

Now, we know a right-sized VA needs every one of those 2,400 workers who have been discharged now. It needs every one of the 80,000 that are targeted in the next few months to be fired. And we learned this morning that there are, in fact, open positions—36,000 of them, including more than 3,000 positions for doctors, thousands others for nurses, thousands for the custodians who maintain the VA healthcare properties.

We are talking about real people who will be fired who are on the job doing essential work right now, and we are talking about discharging people when there are open positions, a need for more doctors, nurses, and others. How is that going to work for recruiting? Not so well when the VA is firing exactly the people whose positions it is trying to fill. That is absolutely a disgrace, and it will be seen as a disgrace by anybody wanting to serve in the VA.

We also learned today that the VA is focusing on legislative measures that will make it easier to fire people, that will more readily enable it to discharge people without stating a reason, without a performance-related reason for firing them.

So we are seeing the biggest attack and assault on veterans' access to care and benefits at least in a generation and maybe in our history, and Trump and Musk have already fired more veterans than any administration before now.

But the numbers fail to adequately tell the story because it is a story of heartbreaking loss as a result of heartless decisions—loss of healthcare on a timely basis, loss of benefits, fear from people who have earned the right to security when it comes to healthcare or the PACT Act.

Over the weekend, there was an article in the New York Times that described some of this real impact going on right now: a VA clinical trial for treating advanced cancers of the mouth put on hold; a VA supply technician whose role was described as critical, fired; a vet center office manager fired, leaving therapists, who should be treating patients, using their precious time sitting at the front desk to check in the patients.

Talk about waste. What we are seeing in real time is not just heartless, heartbreaking firing and deprivation of care; we are seeing waste of talents and time that cry out for action. And in fact, we are hearing that cry from thousands of constituents of my colleagues from all around the country.

This chart shows where we have received complaints and stories from people. Some of their words are here:

Please do not let this administration take all of this away from not only me, but thousands of other Veterans in my similar situation.

I'm a spouse of a 100 percent permanent and total disabled veteran with two young kids. I am scared to fight back and have them target me to eliminate my job entirely, so I just have to take it to protect my family's only income.

The VA provides the veterans community with excellent healthcare in my area, and anything done to devalue that care or its facilities would be detrimental to the veteran community.

The blue represents the States that we have heard from—almost every State in the country, some with many different complaints but all of them expressing fear, apprehension, and anger at what they see as the looming additional cuts in care coming to their communities.

This administration, very simply, is failing to put veterans first.

Let me tell you about a veteran who knows that it is failing to put him first, a veteran on the west coast who shared his story.

I lost part of my foot serving this country, and now, people with zero military experience are gutting the benefits Veterans have earned.

And he continued:

If it were not for the VA, I would not have been able to be in the position I am in now. I own a home and I am able to manage my anxiety with therapy and medication.

He was homeless in 2012. He would go to the library every day to search for—he was not receiving any VA benefits. He didn't know he was eligible. Once he knew about it and he signed up and the healthcare and disability benefits began, he was "propelled . . . into success." He was able to rent an apartment, purchase a car, get a job—"all thanks to the VA." "All thanks to the VA."

And his final comment was:

Please do not let this administration take all of that away from not only me, but thousands of other Veterans in my similar situation.

He knows this administration is not putting veterans first.

What I was hoping to hear in today's hearing was a call to action. Well, we didn't hear a call to action. In fact, we didn't even hear from the Secretary of the VA, who has dodged our questions, refused to answer them, who has failed to be transparent with our committee and with Members of Congress. I was hoping that he would be there or at least that he would be invited to a date certain, but none of it happened.

Instead, the agenda included legislation that attempts to make it even easier for the VA to fire employees. It ignores what is happening on the ground, ignoring the illegal mass terminations of those 2,400 VA employees, with tens of thousands of firings now in the works. That is no way to put veterans first. It is illegal; it is unlawful; it is reckless; and it is morally repugnant because it involves breaking promises.

A great nation keeps its promises, as we promised to veterans that we would provide for their healthcare, that we would give them the benefits of the PACT Act, that we would care for them after they were exposed to toxic chemicals, that we would give them skilled training and job assistance—all of it now potentially ended, at least for a lot of those veterans, because there is a funny thing about service: It is difficult to provide service in an empty office with an empty chair behind an empty desk. Service really does consist of people helping each other. Veterans know it better than anyone because peer-to-peer veterans programs work better than any other kind, and it is one of the reasons why it is important that 30 percent of the Veterans' Administration workforce are themselves veterans. They help each other.

It is no accident that many of those provisional employees who were fired—they are the ones who were fired first—are veterans as well because they are coming out of the service and they are looking for meaningful and productive ways to help other veterans.

I am introducing this week a measure called the Putting Veterans First Act. Essentially, it is a comprehensive effort to "stop the bleeding." I am quoting the commander-in-chief of the Veterans of Foreign Wars—"stop the bleeding." Put pressure on and "stop the bleeding" is what he told us in one of our hearings.

The best way to stop this administration from actively robbing and rolling back our recent bipartisan accomplishments, canceling contracts critical to the implementation of the Dole Act or the Deborah Sampson Act, firing thousands of workers critical to the basic functioning of the PACT Act, from the schedulers who connect veterans to care to the claims staff who process

those PACT Act claims—the best way to stop the bleeding is to put veterans first.

No. 1, hire back all of the veterans who have been fired. No matter what the Agency, hire back those veterans along with all of the military spouses, the veteran caregivers, survivors, members of the Guard and Reserve. They, too, served. Hire back all the VA employees who have been fired, whether or not they are veterans or military spouses or veteran caregivers, survivors, members of the Guard and Reserve—everyone that has been fired from the VA.

Then, if the administration wants to eliminate waste and fraud, let's have some standards, performance-based standards, not just "You are fired because we don't need you" when, in fact, they are needed. But more to the point, any sort of firing ought to be based on individual performance.

Nobody is arguing here that there is no waste in the VA. Nobody is arguing that there is no waste in other Agencies of the Federal Government any more than we would argue there is no waste in any American corporation. Everybody knows there is waste. The trick is to eliminate the waste without throwing the baby out with the bathwater—or to use a much more direct analogy that came from Al Lipphardt, the commander-in-chief of the VFW—when he was wounded in Vietnam, the surgeon took shrapnel out of his arm with a scalpel; he didn't amputate the arm.

Exactly the same choice faces us here—performance-based criteria and standards and a means of appeal for those employees who may be terminated, a means of readily bringing their claim about improper firing to some kind of appeal that is based on performance and merit. It ought to be a matter of merit, not just money, not just slashing and trashing—merit, and then hiring to replace that person. If that person has no merit, fill the position so the job can be done because the need is there. Of course, notice to Congress, to labor partners, and impacted employees before instituting any changes to telework or remote work policies, allowing time for employees to submit reasonable accommodation requests to their supervisors, which would help a veteran, spouse, and caregiver. I have been contacted by those kinds of spouses, like the spouse of a 100-percent disabled veteran with two kids:

I have worked for the Feds for 20 years. My spouse was Active Duty. I am also ADA disabled myself, performed full-time telework for 5 years successfully, including preCOVID with reasonable accommodation. The Agency is re-adjudicating my lifelong disabilities and telework accommodations, even though the prior one approved had no expiration date.

When Trump or Musk talk about mandating return to office—I personally love being in the office. As a former prosecutor, I think being in the office makes managing a workforce

easier in some institutions but not all and not for all employees and certainly not for the disabled veteran who wrote to me. This employee has outstanding performance reviews, and her duties haven't changed. The only change here is the one prompted by President Trump's draconian return-to-office policy.

The Putting Veterans First Act would take other commonsense veterans-first action, such as prohibiting—and this one is really important—prohibiting unauthorized, unlawful access to veterans' data and VA systems by unqualified, uninformed tech bros.

Well, we know what is happening in the VA. Elon Musk's tech bro elves are muscling and plundering their way through the VA's database.

Now, you may say: What is harmful about access to private, confidential, sensitive information potentially about healthcare?

Well, it is an invasion of privacy, but No. 2, it is also illegal. It is potentially a monetization of your information, used for Elon Musk's corporations to make more money or to be shared with his fellow billionaires so they can make more money.

That invasion of privacy, the monetization and possibly weaponization of that information, would be prohibited by the Putting Veterans First Act. It is comprehensive, it is specific, and it makes a priority of protecting veterans and putting them first.

Now, I don't want to exaggerate the chances of this measure passing in the

next month. I am very clear-eyed. I recognize that the administration will put a full-court press against us, that Elon Musk will perhaps denounce it. But I think we have on our side an indomitable, undefeatable, and indefatigable force, and that is veterans, because I am listening to the veterans service organizations who came before our committee on prior days and this morning, representatives from the American Legion, Mr. Coyle from the VFW, and Mr. Murray. We have heard from other organizations that have expressed their concerns about what is happening at the VA. They can put a face and voice to this issue. Their support for putting veterans first can make an absolutely critical difference.

So I want to make a plea to our veterans: You may feel you don't need it, but there is no question you deserve it.

The ones who need it really deserve it as well. They deserve to be put first. They deserve to have no fear or uncertainty or insecurity about whether they live in a State that will not be receiving the kind of benefits and care under the PACT Act or their VA facility won't be renovated or their doctor will be gone or nurses will be missing, their positions unfilled. They deserve to know with the kind of certainty they have earned.

We all talk about our veterans as heroes, which they are, but let's put our money where our mouths are. Let's be measured by what we do, not what we say. And I am extending an arm and a hand to my colleagues across the aisle to join me in this comprehensive bill

that guarantees veterans what they have earned and what they deserve against someone whom we didn't choose—nobody did except Donald Trump. Elon Musk is unelected, unappointed, and unconfirmed, and his DOGE boys are depriving our veterans of what they have earned.

We can't lose hope or energy. We can't abandon our veterans. We can't surrender in this battle. Our veterans have served, and they can continue to serve by helping their brothers and sisters make sure that the Veterans' Administration puts veterans first.

I yield the floor.

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#### ADJOURNMENT UNTIL 11 A.M. TOMORROW

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the Senate stands adjourned until 11 a.m. tomorrow.

Thereupon, the Senate, at 7:07 p.m., adjourned until Wednesday, March 12, 2025, at 11 a.m.

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#### CONFIRMATIONS

Executive nominations confirmed by the Senate March 11, 2025:

##### DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

STEVEN BRADBURY, OF VIRGINIA, TO BE DEPUTY SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION.

##### DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

ABIGAIL SLATER, OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA, TO BE AN ASSISTANT ATTORNEY GENERAL.