

Whereas the mass terminations of employees of the Federal Government are damaging the mental health and economic security of veterans and their families; and

Whereas veterans and employees of the Department have expressed concerns regarding the effect of terminations and attacks on the mental health workforce already carried out by the Department, including—

(1) terminating employees of the Veterans Crisis Line established under section 1720F(h) of title 38, United States Code;

(2) requiring employees of the Veterans Crisis Line to take calls in open cubicles intended for claims processors of the Veterans Benefits Administration;

(3) forcing mental health staff to conduct counseling sessions while in open cubicles;

(4) cutting or postponing suicide prevention training courses;

(5) terminating employees performing critical research at the Department on mental health and substance use disorders among veterans;

(6) cancelling employee assistance program and mental health support contracts for employees of the Department;

(7) terminating staff of Vet Centers (as defined in section 1712A(h) of title 38, United States Code); and

(8) an increase in call volume on the Veterans Crisis Line from veterans who were terminated from the Federal workforce, or who are concerned about losing their health care and benefits: Now, therefore, be it

Resolved, That it is the sense of the Senate that—

(1) actions taken by President Trump and Elon Musk are negatively impacting mental health care and suicide prevention for veterans and should be condemned; and

(2) all mental health and suicide prevention efforts at the Department of Veterans Affairs should be fully staffed and resourced.

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. As if in legislative session and notwithstanding rule XXII, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to the consideration of my resolution, which is at the desk. Further, I ask unanimous consent that the resolution be agreed to, the preamble be agreed to, and the motions to reconsider be considered made and laid upon table with no intervening action or debate.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

The Senator from Kansas.

Mr. MORAN. Madam President, reserving the right to object, clearly, this is an important issue and one that has received attention by the Committee on Veterans' Affairs and will continue to make certain that the decisions that are made by Department officials and by the administration are compatible with the well-being and best interests of those who served our Nation and are now veterans.

The Department of Veterans Affairs does need reform. The status quo is not acceptable. We need to make certain that every veteran, every member of our military who is now a veteran and seeks services in the Department of Veterans Affairs, that their needs are met.

It has been a longtime goal of mine to make certain that the promises that were made to those who served are promises that are kept. We know things aren't as they should be at the Department of Veterans Affairs.

All of us in this Senate have staff members who work on cases—what we call casework—to try to solve the challenges that a veteran meets in dealing with the Department of Veterans Affairs.

We all walk the streets of our home States. We have meetings and have conversations with those. And, often, it is a veteran who comes to tell us the story of what help they still need.

While I continue to believe that nearly everyone—most who work at the Department of Veterans Affairs, many of whom are veterans themselves, are working diligently to make sure their colleagues—veterans they shared that service with—are treated in a fashion that provides them with the best quality care and provides them with the benefits they have earned. Yet we know the system is still far from being able to accomplish that goal.

In fact, the Department of Veterans Affairs—so many times, we have reports from the inspector general, who outlined dramatic changes that need to be made and outlined instances in which the Department of Veterans Affairs has failed in significant ways in meeting the needs of those who served our Nation.

We have about 150-, 200,000 veterans in Kansas. They are a significant component of the nature of our State. They are respected and admired by their fellow Kansans. It is important for us to make sure that the Department of Veterans Affairs is living up to its commitment. It is our job as Senators and it is our job as members of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs to do those things.

The Senator from Connecticut is right. We have provided the tools to the Department, new opportunities for veterans to be better served and served in more ways—combating suicide; making sure that mental health services are more readily available; providing services through telemedicine; and most recently—well, almost most recently—the PACT Act, which provided new and additional benefits, both healthcare and financial, to those who served in Southeast Asia and served in Iraq and Afghanistan in regard to toxic exposure; and even more recently than that, care for and support for caregivers, those who serve their loved ones, family members who help veterans throughout the day in their circumstances—the Elizabeth Dole Act.

So we are actively engaged in trying to make certain and hopefully making progress in making certain that more veterans receive better care at every opportunity. But the VA still needs a serious and thorough evaluation, and a component of that is workforce.

My goal is to make certain that the Department of Veterans Affairs evaluates how many people it needs to meet its mission and then adjusts accordingly, whether that is more or less, but to right-size the VA to make certain that those veterans who are in need of care, who deserve their benefits, are

well cared for and receive the care and compassion they deserve.

So I am going to offer a resolution myself, and in order to get to that point, I need to object to the Senator from Connecticut's resolution—his unanimous consent request.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Objection is heard.

The Senator from Connecticut.

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Madam President, I want to respond very quickly by saying, first of all, I think we share a lot of goals, but we need action. The VA is in crisis impending right now, in real time, affecting real lives in real time, people who need mental health care now, who need the Veterans Crisis Line now, who need those counselors and psychiatrists now.

What I am asking is unanimous consent for a resolution that calls for restoring the VA workforce to meet that crisis and to doing right by our veterans. It shouldn't be partisan. It isn't partisan.

I have been critical of the VA under Democratic administrations, under General Shinseki when he was there and the delays were unacceptable, and nobody was more direct or critical than I was.

We can be bipartisan in our praise and in our criticism, but we need to stand up to the Musk-Trump slash-and-trash regime that has been so harmful to our veterans. And we can't go about it with business as usual. These draconian, indiscriminate cuts are doing harm to our veterans as we speak, and to avoid action is not only inappropriate, it is injustice to our Nation's heroes.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Kansas.

UNANIMOUS CONSENT REQUEST

Mr. MORAN. Madam President, I intend to ask for a unanimous consent agreement in regard to this issue of our care and the well-being of our veterans.

I would indicate that, to my knowledge, the Department of Veterans Affairs has 1,500 fewer employees today than it did at the beginning of the year.

While there is conversation and talk and, in fact, a stated goal about the sizing of the Department, those steps, either because they are not yet ready at the Department of Veterans Affairs to take those steps, the evaluations and understanding of what is necessary for the right-sizing of the workforce, haven't been completed or courts have put in place a stay against any reductions in the workforce. Today, we are 1,550 fewer employees at the Department than we were at the beginning of the year.

I would also remind my colleagues that in the last administration, late in the budget request by the Biden administration, there was a request for the reduction of 10,000 employees at the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The goal that we would say in our sense of the Senate is that the Secretary of Veterans Affairs should make

certain that staffing levels at the Department of Veterans Affairs meet veteran demand to efficiently deliver timely, high-quality healthcare benefits; that the Secretary, in close coordination with Congress, with veteran service organizations, and other such stakeholders as the Secretary would deem necessary, needs to consult with them in reshaping the workforce of the Department; and that we should further enhance our efforts to reduce veteran suicide and improve veterans' mental care.

The Secretary should faithfully follow the MISSION Act in allowing for care in the community. The Secretary should conduct a comprehensive review of policies governing official time to ensure that taxpayer dollars are utilized efficiently and that the primary mission of the Department of supporting veterans is fully prioritized and that the Department's leadership and management should have the ability to act swiftly to ensure we remove employees who have engaged in misconduct or whose actions and performances fall short in providing high-quality care and benefits.

The Secretary should enhance the efficiency, accountability, and cost management in the acquisition programs in the Department.

We need to make changes at the Department of Veterans Affairs, and this resolution would indicate our support for doing so.

I would now say, as if in legislative session and notwithstanding rule XXII, I ask unanimous consent the Senate proceed to the consideration of my resolution, which is at the desk. I further ask unanimous consent that the resolution be agreed to, that the preamble be agreed to, and that the motions to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table with no intervening action or debate.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

The Senator from Connecticut.

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Reserving the right to object, let me first say I appreciate the work of my colleague, the chairman of the VA Committee, where I am the ranking Democrat. Chairman MORAN and I work together in a very bipartisan way on a lot of legislation.

I would like to support his resolution, but we received it only about an hour ago, and so I have been unable to check with my colleagues on this side as to whether there is any objection among them.

Second, although I would like to support it, I have to say no, not because of something it has but what it lacks, and that is, it fails to mention anything about the Trump-Musk assault on the VA and its workforce and particularly the negative impacts of those actions on veterans' mental health and suicide prevention. It fails to call for restoring the VA's skilled professional workforce that is necessary to provide sufficient healthcare, particularly mental health care.

I should also note that prior to Secretary Collins and DOGE, wait times for care—before they took over and seized control, wait times actually decreased in 2024 while the number of new patient appointments increased by 11 percent. So this idea that somehow the VA was wholly failing before this administration is exactly the opposite of reality. The time to process each claim actually decreased. The VA processed 116,192 veterans' appeals, representing a 12.5-increase over last year's record. Those are claims for disability and compensation. Additionally, under the previous administration, veteran homelessness reached record lows—a 55.6-percent reduction since 2010.

The VA also made it easier for veterans to seek mental health care while reducing wait times for that care in new appointments.

Claims that the VA has been placing more barriers for veterans to receive care in the VA and through community care are simply untrue. Since 2019, the VA has made enormous improvements in customer service and has become more welcoming to veterans through historic outreach.

If we listen to veterans, as I do every weekend because I go home every weekend, what I hear is customer satisfaction rising and happiness with VA healthcare. Sure, there are criticisms, and we need to meet those criticisms. There are shortcomings, and we need to improve VA healthcare to address those shortcomings. But VA trust has increased to the point of 80.4 percent this year—an alltime record and an increase of 25 percent since 2016.

Let me just say about labor rights and union activities at the VA, labor organizing and collective bargaining actually expedite conflict resolution. It reduces legal costs. It actually saves money through collective bargaining, not to mention the waste, fraud, and abuse that it helps the Department uncover and address. Those negotiations have allowed the Department to bar criminally bad actors from receiving settlement funds and being reinstated.

There is a lot more to say on this topic, but let me just finish by saying that I hope we can work together. I hope the chairman and I can work together in a bipartisan way to put together our two resolutions and devise one that will pass muster on both sides.

Because of the shortcomings of this resolution, I object.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Objection is heard.

The Senator from Vermont.

UNANIMOUS CONSENT REQUEST—S. RES. 165

Mr. SANDERS. Madam President, let me cut to the chase, and I will try to be brief here. We hear a lot of talk on the floor of the Senate about patriotism, about love of country, about how we all have to work together for the common good. It would seem to me that when we talk about those who sacrificed, those who have put their lives on the line to defend this country, we

are talking about the men and women in America who are veterans.

Yet what we have seen in the last month from the President and from Elon Musk is a chain saw approach to essentially destroy the Veterans' Administration, and that is, there are plans afoot—public; no one is debating the numbers—they want to fire 83,000 employees. When you fire 83,000 employees, no one, nobody believes that anything else will happen but that there will be a deterioration in the quality of healthcare our veterans receive or a delay in the benefits they have earned.

Now, I have heard criticism of the VA. The VA is the largest healthcare system in America. Is it perfect? Absolutely not. Does it have its problems? Of course it does. But compared to what? Compared to the American healthcare system, which is the most expensive in the world? a system in which 83 million Americans are uninsured or underinsured? where 60,000 people die each year? where we have the lowest life expectancy of any other major country on Earth?

So, no, the VA is not perfect. It needs improvement. But I will tell you that in the State of Vermont, I talk to a lot of veterans. I am the former chair of the Veterans' Committee, and I have been honored to talk to veterans of Vermont and all over this country. In Vermont, what they tell me is there is enormous pride in the quality of care they get at the VA Medical Center in White River Junction, VT, and as well in the community-based outreach clinics that exist all over our State.

And I expect, with some exceptions, that is true all over the country. The bottom line is, veterans appreciate the care that they get at the VA. They want it improved, but they appreciate it, and they do not believe that there should be massive cuts to the Veterans' Administration.

The truth is that in fiscal year 2024, before Trump took office, the VA reported over 36,000 vacancies, including 2,400 doctors, 6,300 registered nurses, 1,800 social workers, and 1,200 custodians.

When you have a workforce shortage, the solution is not to fire 83,000 people; it is to add people. It is to make sure you know where your workforce is going and that you have quality people. But you don't lay off 83,000 people.

That is not just my view.

It would seem to me that before you take a chain saw to the Veterans' Administration, you might want to talk to the veterans organizations and see what they think about it.

The Veterans of Foreign Wars, or VFW, said:

We call upon VA to reconsider its planned reduction of 83,000 employees and thoroughly review any proposed cuts prior to rolling out further announcements like this.

The Paralyzed Veterans of America said that they are "deeply troubled by actions being taken in Washington,