

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,

D.C. that are already having a detrimental impact on the services that veterans with spinal cord injuries and diseases like ALS and MS rely on.”

The Disabled American Veterans, or DAV, said:

We are extremely concerned about the leaked proposal to arbitrarily eliminate 80,000 VA employees.

That is what some of the major veterans organizations are saying, and I have talked to all of the—virtually all of the—veterans organizations. And they are deeply, deeply, deeply concerned about the cuts that we have seen and the cuts that Musk is proposing.

So this is not a difficult issue. Everybody here wants to make the VA more efficient. The way you do that is to come up with some plans. You work with the Veterans Committee, and you see how we can make the VA more efficient. Nobody in their right mind thinks that just firing 83,000 people is the way to go.

And let me be very clear: Mr. Musk has made it public that he thinks that we should privatize anything that can be privatized. There are people—not all people—in the Republican Party who eventually want to privatize Social Security. We are looking at \$880 billion in cuts to Medicaid that dismantle that very important healthcare organization.

And if anybody thinks that the laying off of 83,000 employees of the VA—the lowering of quality of care that our veterans will receive—is not a prelude to the movement to privatize the VA, you would be surely mistaken.

So with that, Madam President, as if in legislative session and notwithstanding rule XXII, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to the consideration of S. Res. 165, which was submitted earlier today; further, I ask unanimous consent that the resolution be agreed to, 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 bottom line: Do not lay off 83,000 employees at the Veterans’ Administration.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

The Senator from Alabama.

Mr. TUBERVILLE. Reserving the right to object, on November 5, President Trump was given a mandate: Get this country straightened out. This included waste, fraud, and abuse in our Federal Government, over all Agencies.

The VA is a perfect example. Under President Biden, the VA increased its staff 80,000 employees in 4 years.

Let me repeat that: Under President Biden, the VA increased its staff 80,000 people.

You would think that this would mean that we would increase the efficiency of our VA 80,000 percent. Unfortunately, that is not the case. Despite the Biden administration ballooning the size of the Department, the VA has

nothing to show for it. In fact, wait times and backlogs have gone up. It hasn’t worked. So these cuts are not warranted. They are completely necessary.

By reducing the numbers of employees, these savings can be redirected to actually providing veterans healthcare and benefits, while still protecting the VA’s mission-critical jobs, like doctors, nurses, and claims processors, to do the job it was meant to do. And phasing out nonmission-critical jobs like DEI officers and interior designers, for just a few, is necessary to get this job done.

Now, I don’t want to oversimplify this. I know these problems at the VA exist. They always have existed. Since 2015, the VA care has been on the Government Accountability Office’s list of high risk. That means it has been audited: Are they doing their job? Not very good reviews.

We have to do better for our veterans.

I come from a military family and have spent many hours in the VA. Some are good; some are not so good. Let’s stand up for our veterans.

The VA challenges across the board, from overseeing simple things like safety and access of care, are essential. And it is not—not—by having more people. It is by having better people.

The VA is not supposed to be a massive bureaucracy. That is not what it was meant to be. It was created to serve our veterans.

This resolution being put forward would directly prevent President Trump from carrying out his mandate that the American people gave him. The American people have spoken, and the days of business as usual are over. The VA is going to get better.

For these reasons, Madam President, I object.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The objection is heard.

The Senator from Vermont.

Mr. SANDERS. I am not aware that in the so-called mandate of President Trump—and, by the way, he got millions of votes less than Joe Biden got 4 years previously. I don’t recall that during the campaign, Trump went around the country saying: Hey, elect me, and then I will lay off 83,000 workers at the Veterans’ Administration.

Yes, we all want the VA to operate more efficiently, but the idea that you can lay off 83,000 employees and make that happen is absurd.

The truth is, again, before Trump took office, we had a significant shortage in the number of doctors, nurses, mental health counselors, and other practitioners. So it is disturbing to me that anyone who claims to be supporting veterans in this country and the sacrifices they have made would object to this amendment, this resolution.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Illinois.

Ms. DUCKWORTH. Madam President, let me just say that, at the VA, we re-

cently passed the PACT Act, which added well over a million veterans to the rolls to help care for them after they were exposed to toxic substances. This is not the time to cut the funding for the VA.

But I am here today to speak on behalf of all veterans who have been fired by President Trump and Elon Musk.

Look, Donald Trump couldn’t tell you the meaning of the words “service” or “sacrifice” if he had a dictionary laying open in front of him. So how dare a coward who cried “bone spurs,” when his Nation needed him the most, turn his back on those who, unlike him, were actually brave enough to serve our country in uniform.

What he has done to our veterans in just a few months since he has been back in office amounts to a total betrayal. For no apparent reason, he has already fired more veterans than any other American President in modern history, over 6,000 and counting. He has been forcing the bravest people you or I could ever meet to have to worry about how they are going to put food on their family’s table next week or keep a roof over their heads next month.

The biggest predictor of veterans homelessness is not that they are suffering from post-traumatic stress. It is not substance abuse. It is loss of a job. Homelessness is directly linked to joblessness.

These folks that Trump fired, these are folks who did one, two, six, even seven tours. They came home and chose to continue serving their Nation by joining the Federal service. These are heroes who deserve our utmost gratitude, not a letter from Elon Musk telling them that they failed to do their jobs and that they are out of those jobs.

Instead, Trump and Elon Musk gave them the middle finger and a pink slip. “Cadet Bone Spurs” may like to wrap himself in the flag with one hand, but with the other he is signing off on the orders that sell out our veterans to line the pockets of his rich friends, and our warriors deserve better.

So this afternoon, Senator BLUMENTHAL, Senator SANDERS, and I are introducing three resolutions that demand the reinstatement of every veteran who has been fired and betrayed by Donald Trump. If Republicans actually care about our heroes, like they claim to when they are on the campaign trail, then they will vote with us Democrats and help give our veterans their Federal jobs back. Otherwise, they are making it clear that they would rather bow down at the altar of Donald Trump than stand up for our heroes.

As if in legislative session and notwithstanding rule XXII, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to the consideration of S. Res. 166, which was submitted earlier today. Further, I ask unanimous consent that

the resolution be agreed to, 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 Montana.

Mr. SHEEHY. Reserving the right to object, my colleague Senator DUCKWORTH is a brave veteran of our Nation's War on Terror, and Senator BLUMENTHAL as well served, as did many of us. And I don't think there is any disagreement that we want the absolute best for our veterans—combat or otherwise—and we will always do everything we can in this body to make sure that our veterans not only have the care they need when they get home, but they can pursue great careers for the next phase of life.

But truth also matters, and the truth is there was no outrage from our Democrat colleagues when the Biden administration summarily fired tens of thousands of veterans—Active-Duty servicemembers and reservists—from Federal contracting jobs and from Active-Duty military service without any due process, during the COVID pandemic, when they decided that these people, who had very legitimate reservations about their personal health, did not have a place in our government or military, and they were blowing out the side of the service.

No due process, not even a thank-you letter—they were kicked out of the service—highly trained patriots who fought for this country, who were willing to fight for this country again. That is betrayal. They were betrayed, and nothing was ever said from our Democratic colleagues about that.

The truth is, the VA—the VA, as an organization—is meant to serve our veterans. The purpose of the VA is to take care of veterans, not to grow its own bureaucracy. In the last 5 years since 2019, the VA employment has gone from 379,000 to 486,000 employees, over 5 years—a 28 percent increase—while the VA's budget grew by 77.7 percent during the same period.

During that time, the amount of veterans in our country decreased by 9.2 percent. So as our veteran population decreased, our employment overhead at the VA increased tremendously, and that reflected the similar growth across the rest of our Federal Government.

So what was going on for 5 years, especially during the COVID years, was artificial job creation by the government on a mass scale. And now, to recover our Nation from fiscal tragedy—from a \$37 trillion debt and growing—we have to make hard choices, and those choices have to come down to what is working. And what veterans need most of all is a healthy government.

They fought to protect this country. They have put their lives on the line and sometimes gave away limbs and family members so that this country

could be strong. We owe it to them to make sure we make good decisions and that this country continues to be strong. And that means we have to get this government back in order, and that means returning our Agencies back to pre-pandemic size. And most veterans will support those tough decisions full-throatedly.

The truth is, President Trump is very pro-veteran. His policies, right now, are putting our servicemembers first. He is showing strength on the world stage instead of weakness, which has brought untold tragedy not just on our military but also on our allies around the world.

Growing the government with no end in sight, growing Agencies with no metric for success is not pro-veteran. That is not pro-American. It is just more government.

And the truth is, whether it is the VA or any other Federal Agency, we are proud to have veterans working in this government across the board. They have preferred hiring rights, as they should, and we are going to protect their important jobs and, most importantly, protect their care when they get out. But the VA has to be a healthy, functioning organization for that to occur, as do other Agencies.

Veteran employment is a core value that we have in our Federal workforce. President Trump knows that. This body knows that, and we will protect it. But we also owe those veterans a strong, efficient government. That is what we are going to deliver to them. That is what we are going to do today. Therefore, I object.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The objection is heard.

The Senator from Illinois.

Ms. DUCKWORTH. I just want to set the record straight that the VA's population of employees did grow because of the PACT Act, a bill that was voted on and passed in a bipartisan way to save the lives of those veterans who would otherwise be dying if they did not have access to VA healthcare for the illnesses that are caused by their exposure to toxic substances.

So let's be clear about why we hired more people within the Department of Veterans Affairs: It was because they were given the permission by this Congress, by this body, in a bipartisan way, passing the PACT Act legislation, which funded care for veterans who were exposed to burn pits in Iraq and Afghanistan and toxic substances from their military service.

My resolution is about all veterans who serve this Nation. Some of the veterans who have been laid off are park rangers in our National Park Service who are now out of a job—people who were promoted because they did such a good job.

One person I was trying to get their job back was actually working with the Veterans Crisis Hotline. They were doing such a good job answering the phones that they were promoted to trainer. As soon as they were promoted

to be a trainer to help other people to answer those hotlines, which could help stop veterans death by suicide, they became probationary employees, and they were fired.

That is the kind of thing we are talking about—people being laid off from their jobs, veterans who worked hard for this country and worked hard in the Department of Veterans Affairs and other Federal Agencies like the National Park Service, like the EPA, like the DOT. And that is whom Donald Trump and Elon Musk are firing.

If you want to save money, I am all for it. I am there with you. I actually passed legislation that saved this country billions of dollars in fraud and waste that occurred in the Department of Defense.

I also think that Elon Musk's decision to deport people to India using a C-17 aircraft at the cost of \$2 million of taxpayer money, when normally that flight would cost \$38,000 if you were to actually charter an aircraft, was an egregious waste of taxpayer dollars.

Let's talk about who is wasting money here. Elon Musk is wasting money, and it is Donald Trump wasting money. At the same time, President Trump has become the President who fired the most veterans in our Nation's modern history, over 6,000 fired and counting. Let's set the record straight.

Thank you, Mr. President.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. SHEEHY). The Senator from Nevada.

UNANIMOUS CONSENT REQUEST—S. 1364

Ms. CORTEZ MASTO. Mr. President, I rise to talk about President Trump's tariffs and how they are ruining confidence in our economy. They are raising prices on all of our families, and they are hitting our allies for no reason.

We all know that tariffs can be a useful tool to protect critical American manufacturing and combat our enemies. Targeted tariffs on adversaries like communist China or Iran can actually work to our advantage. And it is natural for us to have trade deficits with countries that have smaller economies because they just can't afford to pay for quality American goods. We are always going to buy more cheap goods from less wealthy countries than they are going to be able to buy from us. Even my Republican colleagues have acknowledged this.

This is why President Trump's blanket tariffs just make no sense. They have no legitimate economic basis. And the formula that he used to impose these blanket tariffs is nonsensical. We know this because President Trump has imposed tariffs on islands uninhabited by humans and on one of the United States' own military bases.

Probably the most egregious error in President Trump's tariff plan was punishing our allies, Israel and Ukraine. Both these countries are currently under attack. They need the United States to be standing with them, not hitting them with nonsensical tariffs that could cause them even more harm.