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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
RULES AND ADMINISTRATION
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6325

March 6, 2008

The Honorable James B. Peake
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Peake:

We write today to once again highlight our concerns about voter registration in VA facilities. Nearly one year ago, your predecessor, Secretary Nicholson, was questioned about the lack of access to nonpartisan voter registration services for our nation's veterans. A response to this inquiry was never received.

Despite this lack of response, we now understand that the VA has engaged in litigation against voter registration efforts by third party groups in VA facilities. In light of the Federal Circuit Court of Appeals' decision that voter registration groups are not allowed to register veterans, we strongly urge you to focus on what the VA can do to ensure all veterans have access to registration.

Certainly we all agree it is an insult to those who have fought to spread democracy and freedom overseas to be denied the right to participate in their own democracy here at home. Senator Feinstein suggested last year that the VA become a "voter registration agency" within the definition of the National Voter Registration Act of 1993. If each facility took a few simple steps to provide voter registration materials, the VA could do its part to guarantee access to voter registration materials for out veterans.

Furthermore, we understand that the Court of Appeals seemed to indicate that the VA's role in assisting veterans was purely medical. However, the VA has a long and proud history of providing a myriad of services to veterans - helping them lead successful and productive lives. Providing them with the opportunity to become more actively involved in our democracy seems an appropriate role for the VA. The argument that providing access to voter registration at facilities would distract from the medical goals is as unfortunate as it is counterproductive.

It's as John Rowan, President of Vietnam Veterans of America, wrote in a recent letter to us:

“Veterans know the price of freedom; they’ve paid for it with their service, with the sacrifices they and their families have made. While only one-quarter, at most, of the veteran population utilizes VA facilities for their health care, designating VA medical centers – as well as community-based outpatient clinics and even regional offices – as voter registration agencies should help more veterans have the opportunity to fulfill their civic responsibility which they have sacrificed so much to preserve for all of us, and vote.”

Randy L. Pleva, Sr., President of Paralyzed Veterans of America – an organization with a membership that uses VA facilities across the nation – agreed by stating:

“Voting is the cornerstone of democracy and the members of Paralyzed Veterans of America and all veterans have served in the defense and promotion of self determination throughout the world. As veterans we believe that voting is not only our right but also our responsibility. To this end the Department of Veterans Affairs should serve as an example ensuring that every veteran that passes through its doors is afforded the opportunity to register and vote. It is through the exercise of our franchise that we ensure the perpetuation of our democracy and serve as an inspiration to others throughout the world.”

The statements of these leaders serve to underscore the importance of righting this wrong.

For these reasons, we once again request that your office identify the policies in place to support voter registration efforts for veterans who use VA facilities. We also request that the VA designate VA facilities to serve as “voter registration agencies” under the definition of the National Voter Registration Act. Social service agencies across the country engage in this effort, and it is time that the Department of Veterans Affairs does the same. We look forward to receiving your response as well as an update on your efforts on voter registration by March 18, 2008. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Dianne Feinstein
U.S. Senator



John Kerry
U. S. Senator

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March 8, 2007

The Honorable R. James Nicholson
Secretary of Veterans' Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Nicholson:

It has come to my attention that our nation's veterans, some of whom are being treated for critical injuries in U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs' facilities ["VA facilities"], may not be receiving the assistance they need to ensure that they are properly registered to vote. It seems to me that those brave men and women who are under your care in VA hospitals should be given the time and assistance they require to make certain they are registered to vote upon return from conflict abroad.

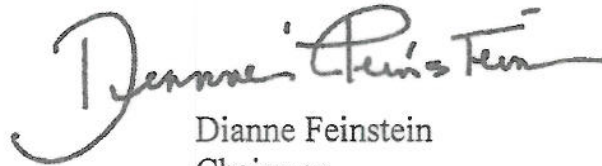
I would like to know what, if any policy is in place to assist veterans in VA facilities exercise their right to vote. If the Department of Veterans' Affairs facilities do not currently offer voter assistance activities, I would like to know why this critical service is not being offered.

As you may know, the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 allows federal offices to choose to be designated as "voter registration agencies," which allows them to do the following:

- Distribute federal mail-in voter registration application forms;
- Assist applicants in completing voter registration application forms; and
- Accept completed voter registration application forms for transmittal to the appropriate State election official.

Given the unique needs of our veterans returning from war, I believe this designation would go a long way towards ensuring one of their most basic, and important rights is provided to those who have most proved their worth to our country. I hope you will consider it.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Dianne Feinstein". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name and title.

Dianne Feinstein
Chairman