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COMMITTEE ON RULES

TRANSPORTATION AND
INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE
(ON LEAVE)

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
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June 8, 2012

General Eric Shinseki
Secretary of the Department of Veterans' Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

RE: Orlando Veterans' Affairs Medical Center

Dear Secretary Shinseki:

I appreciated the opportunity to visit the construction site of the new Orlando Veterans' Affairs Medical Center with you in January 2011. Since that visit, I have returned to inspect the site on three different occasions. Each time I expect to encounter breakthroughs being made to resolve the well-documented problems with the facility's construction completion timeline and to find advances being made to move forward on the many delays. Yet each visit has exposed more problems and more delays.

The most recent promised completion date by the VA is a few short months away. Yet just recently, the general contractor, who has decades of building experience, assured Central Floridians that the new Orlando VAMC will not be done until the spring of 2014. I know that you care as much as I do about getting this project completed for the veterans of Central Florida. They have been promised this project since the 1990s. The groundbreaking at the site in 2008 was supposed to be the beginning of making good on that promise. Unfortunately, instead of becoming a jewel of Central Florida and monument to the service of our veterans, the project's mismanagement has become the very epitome of government waste and inefficiency.

The House Veterans' Affairs Committee held a hearing this spring in an attempt to assess the extent of the problems and to facilitate solutions to the delays. The Department of Veterans' Affairs accepted a majority of the responsibility for the disarray and it became readily apparent that the department did not have people in place who understood the construction process.

Congress insured against unqualified people running the department's major construction projects when it placed specific qualifications into law for the Director of Construction and Facilities Management (CFM). Those qualifications are simple. A qualified individual must meet two basic criteria: 1) hold an undergraduate or graduate degree in engineering or architectural design; and 2) have substantive professional construction management experience. This law and these qualifications have been ignored. As you undoubtedly know, the current Director of CFM does not meet these basic criteria. Further, the Director of the Office of Acquisitions, Logistics and Construction (OALC), for which there are shockingly no prerequisite qualification requirements, does not meet these simple and necessary requirements either.

The House recently passed the Military Construction and Veterans' Affairs Appropriations bill, which included an amendment that I offered on the floor denying funds for the department to compensate a Director of CFM that does not meet these qualifications. My colleagues appear to be equally as dumbfounded as Central Floridians that such an amendment is even necessary, as the amendment passed unanimously.

I do not believe that it is the intent of your office to ignore this law. However, the failure of the Department of Veterans' Affairs to hire personnel who are properly qualified to oversee major construction projects has resulted in a multiple year delay and has caused the cost to taxpayers to soar hundreds of millions of dollars over the original budget at the Orlando VAMC alone.

I urge you to quickly fill the Director of CFM position with someone who meets the qualifications as required in law. I also believe that the Director of OALC should at a minimum have the same qualifications as the Director of CFM, and I am willing to work with you to ensure that the qualifications of such position meet the standards that would be required of an equal position in the private sector.

I look forward to your response including a timeline for filling these critical positions as current law dictates, as our veterans deserve, and as necessary to help get the construction of the Orlando VAMC back on track.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D. Webster', written in a cursive style.

Daniel Webster