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September 6, 2006

The Honorable Jim Nicholson
Secretary
Department of Veterans Affairs
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Mr. Secretary:

Thank you for your letter outlining the efforts of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to comply with Executive Order 13166, Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency (LEP). I agree with your assessment that VA needs additional work to ensure compliance with this important Executive Order. When 40% of VA facilities do not have a policy to help veterans and their families who have LEP, 56% of the facilities provide no training to help staff understand LEP policy and requirements, and nearly a third of VA facilities have no contracts with outside interpreters, then VA is not complying with Executive Order 13166 or VA's own policies.

I appreciate that you have established targeted deadlines for the Veterans Health Administration, Veterans Benefits Administration, and National Cemetery Administration to take action to improve compliance with the Executive Order. These efforts are a good first step towards ensuring that VA improves access to VA services and benefits for eligible LEP veterans and their families.

I am concerned, however, that VA may again falter in its compliance with Executive Order 13166 without an established task force or working group specifically responsible for ensuring VA's compliance with these important requirements and policies. An established and functioning task force or working group would help make sure that VA facilities have the support they need to implement the Executive Order and VA policy.

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For example, your letter identified a number of VA documents that are available in Spanish and other languages. Your letter did not specify any plans or processes to identify documents for translation and distribution. The translation of VA materials to provide LEP veterans and their families with information should be systematic, routine and efficient. A VA task force or working group could help make sure that new VA documents and other materials, including materials on the Web, brochures distributed as part of the outreach efforts to servicemembers transitioning into civilian life, and the post-deployment health reassessment program are translated accurately and distributed to facilities.

A task force or working group could also help VA facilities develop appropriate efforts to conduct outreach to veterans and their families in communities which may have higher proportions of LEP populations to ensure they are aware of eligibility for benefits and services. I appreciate that the Vet Centers focus on the social, economic and cultural needs of particular veteran groups and have a cadre of bilingual counselors on staff. I am concerned that not all VA facilities have such capacity or have conducted outreach to veterans and their families who might have LEP.

I ask that you establish a functioning task force or working group to ensure the full and ongoing compliance of Executive Order 13166 and VHA Directive 2002-006. I also would appreciate your providing details of the VA process to systematically evaluate materials for translation, translate appropriate documents and distribute translated documents to VA facilities.

I would appreciate a response to this letter by September 22, 2006. If you have any questions about this request, please contact Linda Bennett, Democratic Staff Director of the Subcommittee on Health, at (202) 225-9756.

Sincerely,



LANE EVANS

Ranking Democratic Member

cc: The Honorable Hilda Solis
The Honorable Bob Filner
The Honorable Luis Gutierrez
The Honorable Corrine Brown
The Honorable Michael Michaud
The Honorable Ted Strickland
The Honorable Silvestre Reyes
The Honorable Shelley Berkley
The Honorable Frank Pallone, Jr.
The Honorable Grace Napolitano
The Honorable John Salazar