

**STATEMENT OF DR. JENNIFER MACDONALD
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BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON IMMIGRATION AND CITIZENSHIP
COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**"VA'S COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS ON DEPORTED VETERANS AND
NATURALIZATION"**

JUNE 29, 2022

Good morning, Chairwoman Lofgren, Ranking Member McClintock and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for inviting me here today to discuss VA's efforts to serve deported and immigrant Veterans.

When the Immigrant Military Members and Veterans Initiative was collaboratively launched in July 2021 by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Department of Defense and VA, VA Secretary Denis McDonough reiterated VA's mission for all Veterans. "It's our responsibility," he said, "to serve all Veterans as well as they have served us – no matter who they are, where they are from or the status of their citizenship. We at VA are proud to work alongside DHS to make that happen."

VA operates according to statute when determining benefits and health care eligibility, and it is our responsibility to serve Veterans regardless of their current citizenship or immigration status. VA does not track citizenship status, and deportation is not a bar to VA benefits and services. To fulfill our responsibility and identify eligible deported Veterans who may wish to access the care and services they have earned, we are working within current authorities to share and cross-reference data with our interagency partners. We are also collaborating with Veterans Service Organizations, Congress and nonprofit groups to engage these Veterans.

The Veterans Benefits Administration operates an office dedicated to providing benefits support services to Veterans located abroad, and VA's Veterans Experience Office is working to contact Veterans located abroad who may benefit from these focused efforts.

VA's Fourth Mission

VA has provided vaccination support to our Federal partners, including those operating at the border, through our "Fourth Mission." VA's Fourth Mission is to improve the Nation's preparedness for response to war, terrorism, national emergencies and natural disasters. This is accomplished by ensuring continued service to Veterans during emergencies and supporting Federal, state and local emergency management, public health, safety and homeland security efforts. The Fourth Mission is a source of pride and a significant example of VA's contribution to the national interest. Importantly, in no case does the Fourth Mission come at the expense of Veteran care or services.

VA's Fourth Mission vaccination support to our Federal partners between December 2020 and July 2021 included vaccinating 54,916 DHS personnel through *Operation Vaccinate our Workforce* and deploying staff to the border on 6 occasions to vaccinate Customs and Border Protection and Immigration and Customs Enforcement personnel. Further, we have provided vaccine support to Department of Health and Human Services personnel deployed to Texas: Carrizo Springs, Odessa, Dallas and Midland.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department also deployed VA health care personnel to vaccinate employees of other Federal partners, including U.S. Capitol Police, Bureau of Prisons, Transportation and Transportation Security Administration personnel. VA anticipates that we will continue to do that kind of work as part of our Fourth Mission.

Notably, VA has long supported State Fourth Mission requests through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), including deploying personnel in response to hurricanes and other natural disasters. This served as valuable experience for VA's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, during which Fourth Mission requests and assignments grew to an unprecedented number. VA completed 196 missions in 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and Tribal communities, providing direct patient clinical care; testing; education; and training. The assignments varied in skill sets and geographic location, and VA worked collaboratively with FEMA, states and territories to meet emergent needs. VA also deployed staff members to non-VA facilities to share our successful strategies to keep patients safe, shared medical equipment with stressed non-VA health care facilities and accepted nearly 700 non-Veteran patients into VA facilities.

VA COVID-19 Vaccine

Before the COVID-19 vaccine became available, VA put together a team composed of key offices within the Veterans Health Administration to assist in COVID-19 vaccine response planning. As a result of this extraordinary team and their hard work, VA successfully administered over 4.5 million vaccinations, including over 56,000 to the Federal partners described above.

The enactment of the Strengthening and Amplifying Vaccination Efforts to Locally Immunize All Veterans and Every Spouse Act in March 2021 expanded VA's legal authority to provide COVID-19 vaccines to all Veterans, regardless of their VA health care enrollment status, Veteran spouses, caregivers and some beneficiaries. Under this authority, in coordination with DHS, VA hosted two COVID-19 vaccination clinics in the fall of 2021 for Veterans who live in Mexico and are eligible for VA benefits and services: one in San Diego, California at the San Ysidro Port of Entry in September and the second at the Bridge of the Americas Port of Entry near El Paso, Texas in November.

Veterans and their families were vaccinated and monitored in the U.S. prior to being returned to Mexico. During both events, VA staff informed the Veterans about

benefits they are entitled to regardless of their citizenship or immigration status. I had the opportunity to assist with the San Diego event and for most people we vaccinated, one of the primary sentiments we heard from these Veterans was “thank you for doing this; thank you for remembering us.”

Conclusion

VA remains committed to ensuring all Veterans receive the benefits and services they have earned and deserve, in a manner that honors their service. VA will continue to conduct outreach to Veterans who may wish to access the care and services they have earned, and we will continue to deliver excellence through our Fourth Mission when our Federal partners request our collaboration.

This concludes my testimony. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.