

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 27, 2026

The Honorable Doug Collins
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Collins,

We write today regarding the implementation of Section 142 of Public Law 118-210, the Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act (the Dole Act), which gave the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) the authority to pay up to 300 physicians, podiatrists, optometrists, and dentists above the current \$400,000 salary cap beginning as soon as July 1, 2025. During a hearing before the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee in May 2025 and again during a hearing before the House Veterans' Affairs Committee in February 2026, you requested Congress provide the Department with the flexibility to pay doctors above this \$400,000 salary cap in order to better recruit and retain these critical employees. As such, we write to inform you Congress already provided VA with this authority over one year ago, yet you have failed to use it.

House and Senate Committee staff asked about implementation of this authority during a briefing in January 2026, and in VA's written response – provided February 12, 2026 – the Department said the internal policy authorizing implementation had only just been published on January 9, 2026, and no waivers had yet been requested or utilized. During a hearing before the House Veterans' Affairs Committee on February 11, 2026, you requested the authority to pay physicians above the capped amount, despite already having it and acknowledging the authority in written correspondence to the Committees the next day.

Additionally, when Dr. Thomas O'Toole, Acting Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Clinical Services, was asked about this provision during a House Veterans' Affairs Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee hearing focused on implementation of the Dole Act on March 4, 2026, he responded that it would take another "one to two months" before VA would begin awarding waivers to this cap, due to unresolved policy decisions on how to allocate the 300 waivers authorized under the Dole Act. This lag is unacceptable, given Congress authorized the Department 180 days to implement this new authority—a window of time agreed to by career staff at VA during negotiations on the bill. The legislative text also provides guidance from Congress regarding how to prioritize utilization for these waivers – clearly stating waivers should be provided to encourage the recruitment and retention of personnel providing direct patient care. The text further specifies priority should be given for clinicians who will provide care the Department currently procures through costly contract agreements.

In August 2023, during a briefing to Committee staff, VA officials stated approximately 497 physicians were currently receiving the maximum salary amount allowable. Additional feedback from the Department noted these providers were often awarded performance pay they could not receive, because those amounts would exceed the salary cap. The Department assessed at the time that neurosurgery, orthopedic, cardio-thoracic, radiation oncology, and dermatology were the top five specialties across the Department where comparable local market pay often exceeds the salary cap. More recent data should certainly be available to you and easily assessed to determine which staff should be prioritized for these salary waivers.

Despite your repeated complaints about being unable to recruit and retain providers, you have been wholly unconcerned about the net loss of more than 1,300 physicians from the Department since the beginning of this Administration, largely due to the toxic workplace you have created. For nearly 20 years, the Department has employed physicians who should be paid more, but are maxed out due to the \$400,000 cap on compensation. However, fiscal year 2025 marked the first time VA hired fewer physicians than it lost. It is unacceptable that, while your policies have driven physicians from VA, you have also delayed implementing this straightforward authority – sending the message to VA staff and veterans that you have no real interest in recruiting and retaining more doctors. Your continuous complaints during Congressional hearings about this singular barrier to recruitment only attempt to deflect accountability for your apathy and ineptitude in implementing a solution to this issue and shift blame away from your misguided policies that have doctors and health care professionals leaving the Department in droves.

To provide assurance that VA is taking steps to implement the authority from Section 142 of the Dole Act, we request that you provide written responses to the following questions no later than April 10, 2026:

1. How many physicians, podiatrists, optometrists, and dentists does VA currently employ? Please provide a breakdown by specialty, VA medical facility at which they practice, and whether they provide any direct patient care.
2. How many physicians, podiatrists, optometrists, and dentists employed by VA are currently receiving the maximum allowable compensation of \$400,000 per year? Please provide a breakdown by specialty and the VA medical facility at which they practice.
3. How many physicians, podiatrists, optometrists, and dentists does VA currently contract with who practice at VA medical facilities? Please provide a breakdown by specialty and VA medical facility at which they practice.
4. How many contract physicians, podiatrists, optometrists, and dentists practicing at VA medical facilities cost more than \$400,000 per year?
5. How many physicians, podiatrists, optometrists, and dentists is VA currently in the process of hiring? Please provide a breakdown by occupation and phase of the hiring process (e.g., hiring need validation, applications being reviewed, tentative job offer, credentialing and privileging, etc.).

6. What criteria will you use to determine which physicians, podiatrists, optometrists, and dentists to award pay cap waivers under Section 142 of the Dole Act?
7. When will you begin awarding waivers under Sec. 142 of the Dole Act?

We stand ready to assist and support efforts by the Department to recruit and retain the highest quality clinicians and support staff to provide veterans with excellent care. We would welcome the opportunity to work with you to ensure maximum utilization of the authorities provided to you in this effort. However, we request that you genuinely prioritize recruitment and retention of VA's workforce by discontinuing your attacks on the VA workforce and effectively and expeditiously making use of the various tools Congress has provided. These tools should be used to, at a minimum, backfill the more than 30,000 positions that have been vacated and remain vacant since you began leading the Department.

Sincerely,



Richard Blumenthal
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on
Veterans Affairs



Mark Takano
Ranking Member
House Committee on
Veterans' Affairs



Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator



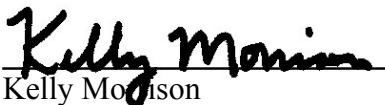
Julia Brownley
Member of Congress



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