

**Chairman Jerry Moran Opening Statement
Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction,
Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies**

VA Efforts to Prevent and Combat Opioid Overmedication

November 15, 2017

(As prepared for delivery)

The Subcommittee will come to order. Good afternoon. Welcome to our eighth subcommittee hearing of 2017. Thank you all for being here today to discuss better ways to address pain management in the Department of Veterans Affairs and prevent the over prescription of opioids.

In 2011, veterans were twice as likely to die from accidental opioid overdoses as non-veterans. In 2013, prescriptions for opiates increased by 270 percent over just 12 years, and VA reported that more than 50 percent of veterans receiving care from VA medical facilities were affected by chronic pain. According to more recent data, over 63 percent of veterans receiving chronic opioid treatment from VA also have a mental health diagnosis.

This Subcommittee understands that the Department has been focused on creating and implementing better ways to monitor the prescribing and usage of opioid medicines while embracing new and alternative pain management techniques to be used in place of or in conjunction with medication. In July last year, the first major federal addiction legislation in 40 years, the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act (CARA), was signed into law to address the opioid epidemic in this country. CARA included a bill led by Senators Baldwin and Capito known as the Jason Simcakoski Memorial and Promise Act or Jason's law, named after Mr. Simcakoski's son. Mr. Simcakoski, thank you for being here with us today. In addition, VA has its own Opioid Safety Initiative to promote the safe and effective use of opioid therapy when clinically indicated.

Today, we would like to hear from the Department about the progress you have made implementing Jason's law and other initiatives, and how this has changed prescribing behavior among clinicians at VA as well as the rates of opioid use by veterans.

Earlier this summer, the VA Office of Inspector General completed a report on non-VA providers prescribing opioids to veterans and found that veterans utilizing care outside VA may be put at significant risk due to conflicting prescribing guidelines among the different clinical settings and the lack of information sharing between inside and outside providers in order to accurately maintain the health records of veterans. According to the Inspector General, non-VA providers "do not consistently have access to critical health care information regarding the veterans they are treating," and the inability to monitor opioid prescriptions written by non-VA clinicians and filled by non-VA pharmacies is a challenge. I understand that Senators Baldwin and Capito are once again at work to address this issue, and I support their effort. Today, I want VA OIG to speak about these findings and how the Department can better serve their patients, particularly as more veterans are choosing to get their care out in the community closer to home.

I wish to thank my colleagues Senators Baldwin and Capito for requesting we hold this hearing. You both have been champions uncovering issues within your local VA communities on this topic and also working with the Department to improve how it manages care. Thank you for commitment to making positive changes for our veterans.

As Members of Congress, we have no greater responsibility than responding to the needs of our constituents. I am grateful today to have Mr. Marvin Simcakoski present to speak directly to us about his experience with VA. Mr. Simcakoski's courage to be an advocate for his son and his tireless commitment to his son's legacy are the reasons we are holding this hearing today. I look forward to hearing about Jason's life and your thoughts on how to make sure outcomes are different for other veterans in the future. Thank you again for being here.

In recent years this Committee has given the Department additional funding specifically for combating opioid abuse, supporting alternative treatments, and researching better methods of pain management. As I've mentioned before, I wear two hats - as an appropriator charged with prioritizing the funding of the Department and as an authorizer with the ability to improve the laws that govern VA's processes. I hope today to facilitate a candid conversation about improvements the Department is making and needs to make, and how Congress can support you with appropriate funding and needed changes to the law.

I'd like to introduce our panel:

From the Department of Veterans Affairs: Dr. Laurence Meyer, M.D., Chief Officer for Specialty Care, and Dr. Friedhelm Sandbrink, M.D., Acting National Program Director for Pain Management; and

Also, the Honorable Michael L. Missal, Inspector General at the Department of Veterans Affairs; and

Mr. Marvin Simcakoski from Stevens Point, Wisconsin. He is the father of the late Jason Simcakoski, the namesake of the Jason Simcakoski Memorial and Promise Act passed last year.

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