

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 30, 2012

The Honorable Eric K. Shinseki
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Shinseki:

We write to express our concern about the membership criteria used by the Department's Voluntary Service National Advisory Committee (NAC) to evaluate prospective member organizations and the NAC's failure to require any standards of conduct for its members.

It is critical that organizations permitted to affiliate themselves with, or invoke the name of, the Department of Veterans Affairs conduct themselves in a manner befitting the Department's mission, its reputation and the integrity of its work. Yet today, any organization that meets a minimum level of monetary and material support to VA facilities is eligible for membership on the NAC. No other review is undertaken by the Department to evaluate a potential member organization, nor does the NAC have in place any standards of conduct to which its member organizations must adhere.

This is both troubling and unacceptable. Without a meaningful review process or standards of conduct, the Department risks legitimizing organizations engaged in questionable business practices by permitting their membership on the NAC. For example, the Veterans Support Organization (VSO) has repeatedly touted its membership on the NAC as a way to represent itself as a reputable organization. But throughout the seventeen states in which it operates, VSO has drawn scrutiny from state authorities, veterans service organizations, local news organizations and veterans themselves. VSO's business practices have been characterized as dishonest, misleading and fraudulent, and in at least one instance, VSO has acknowledged breaking state law.

In response to VSO's suspect practices, we have written to the Attorney General and to Secretary Geithner, requesting that their departments investigate whether VSO has misappropriated public donations or abused its tax exempt status in violation of federal law. We expressed our concern that charity organizations must act as good stewards of the American people's generosity towards our veterans. Surely an organization, such as VSO, which has admitted breaking state law, should be ineligible to serve on the NAC or use the Department's name in furtherance of its own financial interest.

To protect the integrity of the NAC's work, we ask that you review this situation and take such action as you consider appropriate. It is our hope that you will rescind the membership of VSO

and any other organization that fails to reflect the caliber and character of the Department's mission and work, and institute safeguards to regulate the NAC's membership accordingly. We look forward to hearing from you regarding your review of this issue. Thank you for all that you do on behalf of our nation's veterans.

Sincerely,



Patty Murray
Chairman
Committee on Veterans' Affairs



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



Bill Nelson
United States Senator