

A MESSAGE FROM THE SECRETARY

Sustainable Accountability

Over these first weeks as your Secretary, I have spoken to many of you across the country and shared how grateful I am for the work you do each day. I am inspired by your focus on our mission, your commitment to our values, and by your dedication to serve Veterans with dignity.

Today, I signed a new VA policy on accountability that responds to the President's and Congress' Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014 (VACAA). In accordance with VACAA, our new VA policy streamlines necessary removal and appeals processes for senior executives when the best interest of Veterans is served. In short, the law and our policy allow us to terminate a Senior Executive Service (SES) employee more quickly, where the evidence shows termination is warranted, than we might have previously. Due process rights remain. The new policy does not allow VA to terminate employment without evidence or cause, nor does it guarantee that VA's decision to remove an employee will be upheld on appeal. The law and policy do not change timelines related to front-line employees or lower-level supervisors. SES employees who are impacted by this law will receive more specific detail on our new policy soon.

As our new VA policy takes effect, I want you to understand my professional philosophy on accountability, what I call *sustainable accountability*, and what sustainable accountability means for us—VA employees, striving together to make our Department the high-performing customer service organization Veterans deserve and the American people rightly expect.

First, let me describe what sustainable accountability does not mean—it does not mean that heads always roll. That is an over-simplified, short-sighted, and negative interpretation of accountability, and it is not helpful to what we are about here at VA.

Sustainable accountability means ensuring all employees understand how daily work supports our mission, values, and strategy. VA leaders provide resources and help employees understand this relationship so their work can support our mission, values, and strategy. Likewise, employees inform leaders when challenges hinder their ability to succeed. When necessary, leaders make adjustments that give all employees the opportunity to succeed. Whether you are hospital directors, cemetarians, members of the environmental maintenance services teams, or benefits coordinators—whatever your job—understanding and acting on the relationship between VA's mission, values, strategy, and our daily work is an imperative.

Sustainable accountability is about more than top-down, hierarchical behavior modification. It is collaborative. Supervisors provide feedback, every day, to every subordinate to recognize what is going well and identify where improvements are necessary. In that same spirit, employees fulfill their responsibility to Veterans and to the Department to provide feedback and input on how we can better serve Veterans. That is sustainable accountability; the kind of daily exercise necessary in any high-performance organization.

We have work to do.

To achieve the sustainable accountability that we want, we are going to do a better job training leadership. We will flatten our hierarchical culture to encourage innovation and

collaboration. We are going to rate the relative performance of employees—everyone cannot be *the best*. When necessary, we will provide the right training so lower-performing employees have the opportunity to succeed. If that fails, we will move on to the next person so others will have the chance to progress and succeed.

Each day, we must remind ourselves and one another that VA has a noble mission—caring for Veterans “who shall have borne the battle” and their families, as President Abraham Lincoln charged 150 years ago.

We have strong, institutional values—Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect, and Excellence. These are mission-critical ideals that must profoundly influence our day-to-day behavior and performance.

In performing that mission, guided by those values, we will judge the success of our efforts against a single metric—customer outcomes, Veterans’ outcomes. VA is a customer service organization. We serve Veterans.

We hold ourselves accountable to these standards. We do not want VA to just meet a standard. We want VA recognized as *the* standard—in health care and in benefits.

It is both an honor and a privilege to serve as your Secretary.

Robert A. McDonald