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United States Senate

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Secretary Robert A. McDonald
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonald,

Prescription drug abuse is a national epidemic that has increased dramatically in the past decade. Drug overdose deaths, fueled by prescription painkillers, now surpass homicides and traffic crashes in the number of injury deaths in the United States.¹ Prescription drug monitoring programs (PDMP), which are statewide databases that track controlled substances dispensed in the state, can be a highly effective tool to reinforce the federal government's efforts to combat the epidemic. I applaud the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for issuing regulations facilitating the sharing of VA prescription data with state PDMPs. However, in order for PDMPs to function as intended and to serve as a robust tool in reducing prescription drug abuse and misuse, it is imperative that all prescribers, including federal prescribers and pharmacists, participate in these programs. Therefore, I am writing to request that the VA ensures that its providers are registering and fully participating in the PDMPs in states where VA facilities are located.

It is estimated that nearly 1 million veterans take prescription opioids and more than half use these medications chronically beyond 90 days.² Prescription opioid misuse among veterans has been linked to posttraumatic stress, heavy alcohol use, drug dependence, overdose deaths and suicide.² The death rate from opiate overdoses among VA patients is almost double the national average.³ Furthermore, studies indicate that between 30 percent and 40 percent of long-term users of opioids experience problems with dependency and addiction.⁴

Providers in the VA can play a critical role in addressing the prescription drug problem that is impacting states across the country by participating in PDMPs which can help to identify or prevent drug diversion, influence prescribing behavior, facilitate the identification of individuals

¹ <http://www.drugstorenews.com/article/office-national-drug-control-policy-releases-2014-national-drug-control-strategy>

² Sullivan, M. et al. (2014). National Analysis of Opioid Use Among Veterans. Presented at the American Academy of Pain Medicine Annual Conference. Phoenix, Arizona.

³ <http://www.drugfree.org/join-together/va-opiate-overdose-rate-almost-double-the-national-average-report/>

⁴ Boscarino, J.A. et al. (2010). Risk factors for drug dependence among out-patients on opioid therapy in a large US health-care system, 105(10), *Addiction*, 1776-82.

who may have a substance use disorder and reduce prescription drug abuse.⁵ In light of the frequent use of opioid painkillers by veterans and the high overdose rate among this population, I strongly urge the VA to swiftly implement a requirement for its providers to participate in PDMPs in states where they practice

Thank you for your consideration for this important matter. Please provide your response no later than June 12, 2015. If you have questions or concerns, please contact Dr. Chisina Kapungu or Dr. Avenel Joseph in my office at (202) 224-2742.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Markey

⁵ Julie Worley, "Prescription Drug Monitoring Programs, a Response to Doctor Shopping: Purpose, Effectiveness, and Directions for Future Research," *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, vol. 33, no. 5 (2012), pp. 319-328. Note: The GAO study was not included, because it was not published in the peer-reviewed literature.