

August 5, 2016

The Honorable Robert A. McDonald
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonald:

OpenTheBooks.com, a nonprofit research organization located in Illinois, recently uncovered that a sculpture, entitled Meridian X, at the Edward Hines Jr. Veterans Affairs Hospital in Chicago does not appear in any public spending record since 2009. The sculpture was installed in November 2012 at Hines in a dedication ceremony.

This is of particular concern in light of the news reported by ABC, CNN, Fox, *Forbes*, *The Washington Post*, *The Washington Examiner*, and others, that the VA has spent \$20 million over 10 years on artwork while veterans have endured manipulated wait times and 500,000 veterans continue to wait over 30 days for an appointment. Last week, I asked you to support my call for a moratorium on artwork spending by the VA until a formal approval and justification process has been put in place.

A whistleblower from Hines VA has reason to believe that the Meridian X sculpture at Hines VA was hidden in a construction account, making the purchase impossible for the public to find. Sharon Helman was Director at Hines VA from February 2010 to February 2012 – the time during which the purchase was made, according to the whistleblower. Helman was later fired for accepting illegal gifts in the wake of the nationwide veterans wait time manipulation scandal in April 2014. I have previously expressed concerns about wait time manipulation at Hines VA during Helman's tenure.

After Sharon Helman was fired, this Administration has since stated it will not use the executive removal authority passed by Congress under the Veterans Access, Choice, Accountability and Transparency Act of 2014, *Public Law 113-146*. The public is left to assume that the dismissal of Sharon Helman appears to be overturned.

As you consider reinstatement of Sharon Helman on the federal payroll, Illinois taxpayers would like to know:

1. Who approved the purchase of Meridian X, how much did it cost, and from what account was the purchase made?
2. Why is the purchase of the Meridian X not in public records of Hines?

It is unacceptable that the VA is not using executive authority to remove Sharon Helman. I stand with the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), American Veterans (AMVETS), Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) and several other veterans service organizations who have joined together to uphold the Choice Act's firing provision.

The Choice Act was approved by Congress and signed by the President to hold VA executives accountable and show the American people that veterans are the first and only priority the Department of Veterans Affairs. Ignoring the law puts the VA's reputation into further question.

Sincerely,



Mark Kirk
United States Senator

cc: Marc Magill, Acting Director, Hines VA