

July 26, 2016

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

Dear Secretary McDonald:

According to the Forbes opinion piece, *The VA's Luxury Art Obsession*, published today, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) spent over \$20 million on high-end art over the last decade. Last year in June, the VA circulated a memo admitting no formal policy existed to prevent the excessive spending of art and created a temporary approval process. Within that year, the VA reportedly spent \$1.8 million on artwork. However, in this same period of time, the VA failed to pay private medical practices billions of dollars for medical treatment provided to veterans under the Veterans Choice Program, a program created to address the VA's wait time scandal in 2014. As Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction and Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies (MilCon-VA), which authors the VA spending bill, I question the priorities of the VA for art purchases while veterans wait for care and call on you to block further spending on art by the VA and formalize processes which include using artwork by veterans instead.

The House Veterans Affairs Committee highlighted the VA's excessive artwork expenditures totaling over \$6.3 million at the VA Palo Alto Health Care System, last fall. Now, OpenTheBooks.com, a non-profit organization located in Burr Ridge, Illinois, today released research that uncovered the VA continues to spend limited taxpayer dollars on artwork instead of veterans' health care.

Examples of your extravagant spending include:

Palo Alto: \$483,000 on a giant rock sculpture and \$807,000 for site preparation for the giant rock, \$365,000 for a sculpture at the aquatic center entrance, \$305,000 for a sculpture in an exterior lobby, \$330,000 for a half arc inside the mental health center, and \$285,000 for art on the side of a parking garage displaying quotes by Abraham Lincoln and Eleanor Roosevelt that light up in Morse Code.

San Francisco: \$32,000 on 62 local image photographs or \$500 per photo.

Anchorage: \$100,000 for a glass sculpture for an outpatient center.

Puerto Rico: \$610,000 on artwork for the new healthcare facility.

Dr. David J. Shulkin, M.D., the Under Secretary for Health Veterans Health Administration, and yourself have testified before my Subcommittee that the VA is understaffed and budget-strapped. Yet, the VA continues to spend irrationally on decorations instead of on care for our veterans, like \$21,500 for a 27 foot artificial Christmas tree in Chillicothe, Ohio.

Please respond with confirmation of a moratorium on art spending by the VA and outline the specific approval process which has been used for purchasing artwork with taxpayer dollars, including who has the authority to advance spending millions of dollars on art instead of veterans. The VA has not taken the directive over a year ago to stop excessive, non-veteran spending on artwork. A Congressionally approved process needs to be formally instated, so the American people are informed on how their tax dollars are spent.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mark Kirk". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the left.

Mark Kirk  
United States Senator