



Congress of the United States  
House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515-3605

Dear Mr. Haskins,

Thank you for writing to me about the VA Accountability First and Appeals Modernization Act of 2016. I am proud to represent a district with one of the largest veteran populations in the nation, and so caring for our veterans is especially important to me. I hope you are pleased to hear that I supported this important legislation when it came to a vote in the House on September 14, 2016.

Nothing is more important to me in Congress than making sure veterans and their families are provided for. When the reports about the backlogs, lies, and outright neglect at the VA came out in 2014, I was absolutely crushed. While I believe it's critical to ensure that our VA employees are held accountable for their actions, Congress should also be held accountable for its inaction. In addition to failing to properly fund the VA year after year, Congress ignored this crisis as it was unfolding. It is infuriating that after all of the wealth we've poured into overseas conflicts, we were short-funding our VA facilities back home. I fought against sequestration for years for this exact reason.

About the only good thing to come out of this scandal is that Congress actually did something. The Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014 (VACAA) poured significant additional money into the VA, and it created a short-term solution for the backlog. I was proud to support it when it came to a vote in the House.

The VA's success in cutting down its claims backlog was quickly, and unfortunately, overshadowed by a surge of appeals. The nearly 80-year-old lengthy VA appeals process was unable to handle the volume of appeals in a timely manner, resulting in a massive appeals backlog. The VA's ideal claims appeal turnaround time is a year, but the current average turnaround time has grown to five years. While a thorough appeals process is undoubtedly necessary, we cannot ask veterans to put their lives on hold for this long to wait on an appeals decision.

Veterans deserve better than this, and I was glad to join my colleagues in Congress in passing legislation that would help modernize the appeals system. The VA Accountability First and Appeals Modernization Act of 2016 would update the appeals process in addition to restructuring the accountability mechanisms for VA employees. I was proud to join 309 of my colleagues in voting for this legislation when it passed the House of Representatives on September 14th, 2016. The bill has been referred to the Senate where it will undergo hearings and debate. I encourage you to reach out to our U.S. Senators, Patty Murray and Maria Cantwell.

Throughout our nation's history, exceptional men and women from across this country have come together for a common purpose: to keep our nation, our communities, and our families safe. As our service members sacrifice everything for the sake of our freedom, the very least we can do is provide comfort and security upon their return home. Please know that I will continue to work with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to achieve this for veterans both in Washington state and across the nation.

Thank you again for writing me. I hope you stay in touch as I continue to represent Washington's 10th Congressional District.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Denny Heck". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Denny Heck  
Member of Congress