

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

November 4, 2005

Honorable Jim Nicholson  
Secretary  
Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Ave., NW  
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Nicholson:

The Armed Forces are becoming more representative of the proud diversity of our nation. One in ten soldiers in the United States Army and one in seven Marines are Hispanic Americans. Asian and Pacific Islander Americans represent 7% of the United States Navy. Roughly, 3% of the United States Navy and United States Marine Corps servicemembers are American Indians or Alaskan Natives.

Just as the United States Army has a Spanish language campaign – “Yo Soy El Army” --- to improve recruiting efforts with Hispanic citizens and permanent residents of our country, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) must also reach out to veterans and their families in Spanish, and other languages.

Executive Order 13166 requires the VA to prepare a plan to improve access to its programs by eligible persons with limited English proficiency (LEP). The Veterans Health Administration Directive 2002-006, which implements the Executive Order, requires VA medical facilities and Vet Centers to:

- conduct a thorough assessment of the language needs of the population to be served, including identifying the non-English languages that are likely to be encountered;
- develop and implement a comprehensive language assistance program, which includes hiring bilingual staff and interpreters for patient and client contact positions, translating written materials (such as consent forms, notice of free language assistance and outreach materials) in languages other than English;
- train staff on the LEP access policy and on carrying it out; and,
- establish vigilant monitoring and oversight to ensure that LEP persons have meaningful access to health care and services.

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The written policy has many sound components; however, we are very concerned that it is not being implemented or monitored in a coordinated manner.

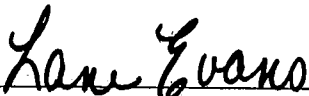
We ask that, consistent with VA's policy, you take the following steps:

1. Establish a task force to evaluate implementation and to prioritize needed actions to implement the four components of the LEP access plan;
2. Develop a specific plan to ensure seamless transition of veterans and their families to receive benefits, including bilingual readjustment and bereavement counseling;
3. Establish a process to translate vital documents and other materials, including materials on the Web, brochures distributed as part of the outreach efforts to servicemembers transitioning into civilian life and the post-deployment health reassessment program; and,
4. Conduct outreach to veterans and their families in communities, which may have higher proportions of LEP populations to ensure they are aware of eligibility for benefits and services.

We ask that you advise us of your plans to carry out these efforts and to ensure the full implementation of a comprehensive and coordinated plan to improve access to VA services and benefits by eligible LEP veterans and their families.

We would appreciate a response to this letter by December 2, 2005. If you have any questions about this request, please contact Linda Bennett, Democratic Staff Director of the Subcommittee on Health, at 202-225-9756.

Sincerely,



LANE EVANS

Ranking Democratic Member

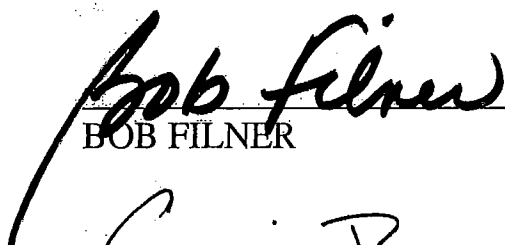


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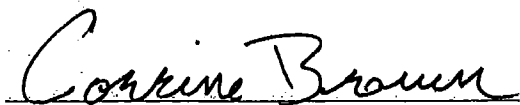
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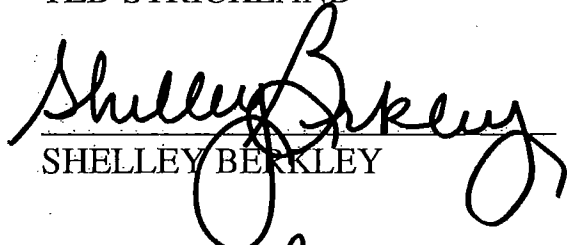
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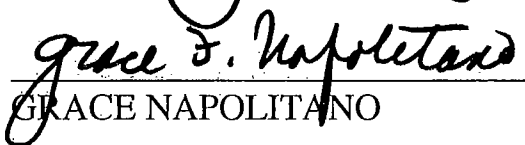
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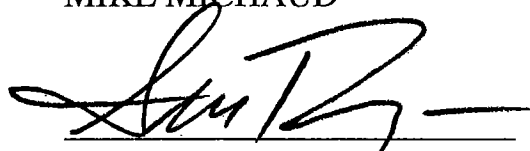
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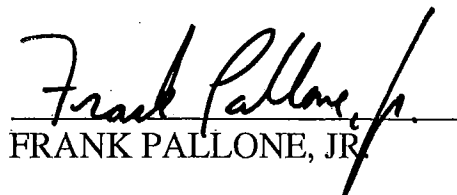
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