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Congress of the United States
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COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND
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SUBCOMMITTEE ON HIGHWAYS AND TRANSIT
SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER RESOURCES
AND ENVIRONMENT

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT, CHAIRMAN
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL SECURITY

August 19, 2020

The Honorable Michelle Steel
Chair, Second District
County of Orange
333 W. Santa Ana Blvd.
Santa Ana, CA 92702

The Honorable Andrew Do
Vice Chairman, First District
County of Orange
333 W. Santa Ana Blvd.
Santa Ana, CA 92702

The Honorable Donald P. Wagner
Supervisor, Third District
County of Orange
333 W. Santa Ana Blvd.
Santa Ana, CA 92702

The Honorable Doug Chaffee
Supervisor, Fourth District
County of Orange
333 W. Santa Ana Blvd.
Santa Ana, CA 92702

The Honorable Lisa A. Bartlett
Supervisor, Fifth District
County of Orange
333 W. Santa Ana Blvd.
Santa Ana, CA 92702

Frank Kim
County Executive Officer
County of Orange
333 W. Santa Ana Blvd.
Santa Ana, CA 92702

Acting Director
Orange County Veterans Service Office
County Operations Center
1300 Grand Avenue, Bldg. B
Santa Ana, CA 92705

Dear Chair Steel, Vice Chairman Do, Supervisor Wagner, Supervisor Chaffee, Supervisor Bartlett, and Mr. Kim,

We write to express our concerns about reports of long wait times and understaffing at the Orange County Veterans Service Office (OCVSO). During the COVID-19 public health crisis – and subsequent economic downturn – timely processing of veterans' benefit claims is vital to ensure Orange County veterans can receive the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) benefits they earned through their service to our country.

The OCVSO is a vital institution in our Orange County community. It serves as a gateway for many veterans to ensure they can receive the benefits they earned through their selfless service to our nation, and has helped countless Orange County veterans access their benefits by assisting, advising, and advocating on their behalf with the VA.

This office is especially important for Orange County veterans due to the relative lack of regional services directly supporting veterans in our communities. As you know, while there are three Veteran Outpatient Clinics in Laguna Hills, Anaheim, and Santa Ana, the nearest VA Benefits Offices are located in Los Angeles and San Diego, while the nearest VA Medical Centers are located in Long Beach and San Diego.

It is our understanding that the OCVSO is currently staffed at below 50 percent, with only three out of seven staff positions filled. It is our further understanding that as a result of these staffing shortages, average cases are taking up to three months to receive an appointment with an accredited claims officer. Especially at a time when so many are suffering the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, we believe wait times of this length are simply unacceptable.

We recognize the challenge of hiring, training, and retaining staff at the OCVSO, especially during a time when state and local governments are facing such dire financial outlooks as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Please know we continue to fight for additional federal fiscal relief for the County and our local governments. Additionally, Rep. Levin has introduced the Commitment to Veteran Support and Outreach Act (H.R. 5516), which would create a VA grant program to support the work of CVSOs.

We also are working to augment the work of the OCVSO by offering casework services to our constituents that need assistance with VA claims. However, according to House Ethics rules, our offices are unable to assist veterans with filing claims and may only refer these cases to a government-run veterans service office such as the OCVSO. Improved operations at the OCVSO would allow our offices to more effectively work together to deliver the services Orange County veterans have earned.

An efficient and functional VSO is not only the right thing to do for our veterans but also a prudent investment in our communities. According to the California Association of County Veterans Service Officers' 2020 Annual Report, County Veterans Service Officers accounted for over \$457 million in new or increased federal veterans' benefits brought into California's economy between July 1, 2018 and June 30, 2019. Thanks to the hard work of the staff at the OCVSO, they helped secure more than \$17 million in new benefits for Orange County veterans during that same time period. Ensuring that veterans' benefits claims are processed in an efficient and timely manner can have significant benefits for our communities during a time of great economic need.

We ask that you provide an update on your plans to reduce wait times for veterans' benefit claims at the OCVSO. We stand ready to work with you to achieve our shared goal of ensuring veterans can access the benefits they earned through their service to our nation.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



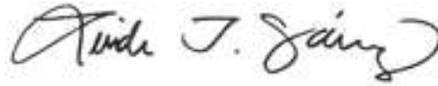
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Member of Congress



Gilbert R. Cisneros, Jr.
Member of Congress



Mike Levin
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Linda T. Sánchez
Member of Congress



Katie Porter
Member of Congress



Alan Lowenthal
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