

THE MERCURY

MANHATTAN, KANSAS

December 23, 2019

Kansas' Moran takes over Veterans' Affairs Committee with focus on suicide prevention

By Bryan Lowry, The Kansas City Star

Sen. Jerry Moran, R-Kansas, said he will be leaning on veterans to help him set the agenda when he becomes chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee in January.

Moran, who has a home in Manhattan, will succeed Sen. Johnny Isakson, a Georgia Republican who officially retired this month after two decades on Capitol Hill, including four years chairing the Senate panel which oversees the Department of Veteran Affairs.

Moran, who has served on the committee since he joined the Senate in 2011, said most of the veterans-related legislation he's worked on has originated with veterans in Kansas. He'll take a similar approach as chairman and look to veterans nationally to help set the committee's agenda.

"Somebody who calls the office, somebody who runs into me

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on the street, somebody who comes to one of my town hall meetings and they've got a story about something's gone wrong in their lives and they need help. Or something's gone wrong and they've been seeking help from the VA and they haven't gotten the help that they need," Moran said. "So our agenda will be driven by what veterans tell us are the things that are causing difficulties in their lives."

Moran said the top issues on his list are suicide prevention and ensuring that veterans suffering from cancer and other illnesses due to toxic exposure get the care they deserve.

McClatchy reported in October that the rate of cancer treatments among veterans has increased dramatically since 2000, a period during which the U.S. has fought wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The surge includes a 61 percent increase in urinary cancer treatments and a 96 percent spike in liver and

pancreatic cancer treatments.

The VA faced a scandal in 2014 when it was revealed that some of its hospitals falsified data to conceal long wait times for appointments. Moran said the situation has improved following reform legislation, but he's sensitive to the perception from many veterans that it takes too long to process claims or provide care.

"If there's an attitude or approach of anybody at the VA that says we're just interested in slowing down the process so that we don't have to pay a claim, those people should not be working at the Department of Veteran Affairs," Moran said.

Eric Gang, a New York-based attorney who specializes in filing veteran appeals, said the agency takes a skeptical approach to claims as a check against fraud. But for veterans with cancer who can't afford months or years of denials, "it's devastating to them, they often don't survive many times."

This month, one of Gang's clients, Korean War veteran Thomas Nielson from Arizona, was awarded \$663,000 in retroactive VA payments. The VA had first denied his claim for disability benefits for an autoimmune disease in 1960 and Nielson had been appealing the decision for decades, because the autoimmune disease rendered him unable to

work, Gang said.

The payments will go to his widow, because Nielson died in 2014. If Nielson had not had one, the claim would have become void and the VA would have kept the money, Gang said. Nielson's award is "one of too many examples of the VA's 'deny till they die policies' horrifically visible in human terms," Gang said.

A recent inspector general report found that the VA wrongly denied more than \$53 million in emergency medical care for veterans treated at non-VA hospitals from April through September of 2017.

As a Kansan, Moran said he's particularly interested in ensuring that rural veterans get access to care. He pointed to his 14 years in the U.S. House representing the Kansas' 1st congressional district, a vast, heavily rural region which covers more than half the state.

"The district is the size of Illinois and there is no VA hospital, so what I've seen in my time in Congress... is there's just lots of veterans in rural America that decide not to utilize the VA because it just isn't really available to them," Moran said. "Part of that is distance. Part of that is knowledge. We still have so many veterans who don't know what they're entitled to, the services that are available."

Moran will be leading the

committee next year when the VA launches a new \$10 billion electronic health records system designed by Cerner, the Kansas City-based health care information company with offices in both Kansas and Missouri.

"We need to make sure that the VA and Cerner and the Department of Defense do their jobs well," Moran said, explaining that the records will be crucial for ensuring timeliness of care and even helping the VA identify veterans at risk for suicide.

Moran has co-sponsored legislation with Sen. Jon Tester, D-Montana, the committee's ranking Democrat, aimed at reducing the suicide rate by increasing the number of VA psychiatrists and providing more assistance for the transition to civilian life.

Tester said in a statement that the legislation "aims to aggressively combat the national veteran suicide rate by providing more folks with the mental health care services they need" and that he looks forward to working with Moran "to ensure we continue to hold the VA accountable in delivering timely, quality, and robust care and benefits to all veterans."

Moran noted that he was in high school when the Vietnam War ended. If he had been a few years older, he could have been

drafted to serve.

“So by the circumstance of a birthday, someone who is a year older than me probably served in Vietnam and somebody my age probably didn’t,” Moran said. “I have great regard for those that did, but I also saw how poorly they were treated when they returned home and I just committed to myself as a 16-year-old kid that I’m going to do everything I can to make certain that veterans are respected and honored.”

“Now that I have this job I need to do more than just pay honor and respect,” he said. “This is also about making sure that the promises that were made are kept.” ■