



Supporting Signing Death Certificates Within 72-Hours

June 24, 2024

The Honorable Denis R. McDonough
Secretary
Veterans Administration
810 Vermont Avenue NW.
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough:

On behalf of the undersigned elected officials, Veterans, and family members of Veterans, we'd like to ask for your support in changing current Veteran Administration (VA) policies regarding the signing of veteran death certificates.

Secretary McDonough, we know how important it is to help, support, and honor those who lay their lives on the line every day to protect the freedoms we enjoy in this country. As a nation, we owe an immeasurable debt of gratitude to those who have served and sacrificed for the freedoms we cherish from the minute they enlist in our armed services until the minute they take their last breath. We must continue to show gratitude to our veterans and make sure their end-of-life journey is carried out with expediency and dignity.

Unfortunately, this is not happening today. Over the past four years we have seen an increase in the number of veteran death certificates that have been refused to be signed by VA doctors. The explanations given by VA doctors range from not being trained in how to sign a death certificate or only having seen their patient via telehealth versus in-person. The latter should not be an official policy of the VA.

During COVID no veteran was visiting their VA primary care physician in-person. All appointments were done virtually. In one case during COVID the VA doctor refused to sign the death certificate stating that they had not seen the veteran in-person during this timeframe. They couldn't due to COVID. During the veteran's virtual exam, the doctor prescribed medication and did note the patient was at end of life. COVID taught us that telehealth can and is effective. We should not be denying a veteran's family a timely burial because their physician hadn't been physically face-to-face with the patient during a prescribed period of time. We have also heard that it is the Medical Examiners responsibility. That is not the case and should not be the VA company line or policy. The responsibility falls upon the veterans primary doctor.



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Currently, we are seeing as long as a 6–8-week delay in getting a veterans death certificate signed. This causes additional stress and strain on an already grieving family. This delay can cause financial hardship when the family of the veteran cannot get their death benefits in a timely manner. When the VA doctor refuses to sign the death certificate, the local medical examiner (ME)/coroner must do it. But unfortunately, the ME/coroner does not have a relationship with the veteran. The VA doctor has a relationship with the veteran as their primary care physician. The ME/coroner does not know the medical history of the veteran. The VA doctor does. The ME/coroner does not have a complete picture of the veterans life so therefore does not have a complete picture of their death. The VA doctor does.

Up to this point, the family has already been delayed in moving forward with planning end-of-life activities; planning a funeral, completing financial requirements, and receiving veteran death benefits. Now, they will have to continue waiting while the ME/coroner requests and receives the medical records from the VA. In some cases, the ME/coroner may not receive the entirety of the medical records held within the VA. This can be time consuming and generally takes 1-2 hours for an ME/coroner to review the file and then make an official cause of death determination. This may not seem like a long time, but when you already have a full case load, taking this precious time away from current duties forces them into longer than necessary hours or delays for other families grieving the loss of a loved one.

Mr. Secretary, the solution is easy. We ask the VA to create an official, uniform policy that states when a veteran dies of natural cause, the veterans primary VA doctor (or someone within the VA) will be responsible for signing the death certificate within 72-hours of being notified of the veterans death. This is more than a reasonable timetable. We also request the VA support our proposal allowing ME's/coroner's to request reimbursement from the VA for the time put into reviewing these cases and signing the death certificate. These costs should not fall on local governments, who are already facing budget shortfalls.

This solution will speed up the time the family can bury their loved one. This solution will speed up the timetable for a family to receive the veteran's death benefits. And this solution will reimburse the ME/coroner and local governments for providing a service when the VA cannot provide these services within 72-hours. Most importantly, these changes honor our veterans in a way they deserve, with grace and dignity.

Our veterans risk it all and, in some cases, give it all to defend our freedoms. We simply ask that as they take their final journey, the VA is there for them and their families. Not in 6-8 weeks, but if not immediately at least within 72 hours. We owe them that.



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We ask for your support for this proposal and an opportunity to sit down with you to discuss the issue, the need, and the impacts these unnecessary delays have on families.

Thank you in advance for taking the time to learn more about this critical issue and working towards a solution. We look forward to meeting with you soon to discuss an easy and immediate solution. If you or your staff have any questions, you can reach Paul Miller at (703) 383-1330.

Respectfully,

Hon. Mike Gamache

Anoka County Commissioner

Hon. Julie Jepson

Anoka County Commissioner

Hon. Jeff Reinert

Anoka County Commissioner

Alabama State Senator Tom Butler, Chairman, Veterans and Military Affairs Committee

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Minnesota, Anoka County, Midwest Medical Examiner's Office, Shane Sheets
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North Carolina State Representative Donnie Loftis, Chairman, Military & Veterans Committee
North Carolina State Representative Cythnia Ball
Pennsylvania State Representative Lindsay Powell
Pennsylvania, Lehigh County Commissioner Sheila Alvarado
Rhode Island State Representative Frank Ciccone
South Carolina, Lexington County Commissioner, Director of Veterans Affairs, Ed Lundeen
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Jodi L. Harman, family member of a veteran
Carrie Issac, family member of a veteran
Chase Lafferty, family member of a veteran
Lisa Laudeman, family member of a veteran
George Miller, Veteran
Stephanie Moore, Veteran
Timothy Moore, Veteran
Keny Underwood, family member of a veteran
Vernon F. Reinert, Veteran
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