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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 5, 2011

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The Honorable Eric K. Shinseki
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Shinseki:

I am writing to encourage the Department to use project labor agreements (PLAs) on all major construction projects, and, where feasible, other minor construction or non-recurring maintenance projects.

As you know, President Obama issued Executive Order 13502, recommending the use of PLAs on federal construction projects exceeding \$25 million at the start of his presidency. I would like to suggest that the Department should not consider this figure to represent a floor, and should actively seek out ways to utilize PLAs for projects valued at less than \$25 million when feasible. Consequently, I am concerned that there may be other projects where a PLA may be more beneficial to veterans and taxpayers yet the Department has not considered the use of PLAs on projects under \$25 million, and would encourage the Department to do so.

PLAs create a business model that is explicitly structured to protect and support the local community, workers, and wage standards to ensure that on public projects tax payers receive the best quality product for their money.

A March 2009 Cornell University study confirms: PLAs can be a very useful construction management tool for cost savings, for on-time, on-budget, and quality construction. PLAs maximize project stability, efficiency and productivity and minimize the risks and inconvenience to the public that often accompany public works projects.

In the absence of PLAs, contractors do not compete on the basis of whom best can train, equip and manage a construction crew and project. Instead, they compete on the basis of who can find the cheapest workers which doesn't ensure a quality project finished on time.

My specific concern in this case stems around the construction of the new Outpatient Clinic Building and Renovations on Building 86 at the Walla Walla VA Medical Center. While I understand that the Department conducted a market impact study on the area, I was disappointed to learn that the project ultimately was not awarded under a PLA, especially because of the impact of PLAs on the subcontracting process. I would hope that the VA will increase the number of projects where PLAs are considered, with the expectation that we will find more instances to use a PLA.


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As Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis said, "Project Labor Agreements are a win-win; they benefit businesses, workers and taxpayers." When our government invests taxpayer dollars, we should expect the best product or services possible, that it be completed on time and with the least disruption to the community as possible. I believe project labor agreements give us the best chance at achieving those expectations.

We owe it to the veterans who will be served in these facilities, and to those workers on taxpayer funded projects that they be provided a fair wage and the worker protections provided by a PLA. Further, as veterans transition from military service to working civilians many of them do so through the Helmets to Hardhats program, a program that connects veterans to promising careers in construction and trades. These veterans in particular should be honored with the wages and benefits afforded through a PLA. Our veterans deserve and should receive nothing less.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. I am confident that, working together, we can ensure that veterans have access to high quality facilities in a timely and cost-effective manner.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Patty Murray". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Patty Murray
Chairman