

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

August 11, 2020

The Honorable Robert Wilkie  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Wilkie,

We write today with grave concerns regarding painful and outdated cat testing at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). As you are aware, the FY20 MILCON-VA appropriations bill that was signed into law in December 2019 included language to drastically restrict wasteful and inhumane testing on dogs, cats, and primates at the VA. The bill also requested a plan to “eliminate or reduce” the use of these animals in research by December 2025.<sup>1</sup> While painful dog testing at the VA has been significantly curbed in recent years, including through the passage of a complete defund of the practice in the House FY21 MILCON-VA appropriations bill on July 24, 2020,<sup>2</sup> we are disturbed to learn that questionable VA experiments on cats have continued at facilities in Cleveland, Louisville, and Los Angeles at great expense to taxpayers.

We understand from materials recently released under the Freedom of Information Act, including troubling videos and photographs, that the Cleveland VA has spent at least \$3.4 million in taxpayer funds from the VA and NIH since 2016 to purchase dozens of cats, perform invasive surgeries on them, damage their spinal cords, and ultimately kill them for tests related to incontinence and constipation.<sup>3,4,5</sup> Records show that some of these cats exhibited distress, seizures, bloody urine, and depression, and at least one was euthanized due to surgery complications.

At the Louisville VA, cats are given spinal cord injuries, placed on treadmills and narrow walkways to study their walking, and then have their spinal cords completely severed before being killed.<sup>6</sup> According to the VA, this project cost taxpayers \$324,383 in FY19 and is slated to use and kill 80 total cats.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, the Los Angeles VA has spent nearly \$5 million<sup>8</sup> in taxpayer money on sleep-related experiments in which cats have electrodes implanted into their brains, after which they are killed and their brains removed and dissected. This study is taking place despite the fact that the Los Angeles VA ended sleep disorder experiments on dogs in 2017 after it was determined that the tests were unnecessary and that alternatives were available.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sec. 249: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/1865/text>

<sup>2</sup> Sec. 246: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/7608/text>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.research.va.gov/about/funded-proj-details.cfm?pid=513604> (2019)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.research.va.gov/about/funded-proj-details-FY2017.cfm?pid=513604> (2017)

<sup>5</sup> [https://projectreporter.nih.gov/project\\_info\\_history.cfm?aid=9303489&icde=0](https://projectreporter.nih.gov/project_info_history.cfm?aid=9303489&icde=0)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.research.va.gov/about/funded-proj-details.cfm?pid=554931>

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.research.va.gov/programs/animal\\_research/061219-force-feedback-redacted.pdf](https://www.research.va.gov/programs/animal_research/061219-force-feedback-redacted.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> NIH grant #5R01NS094062-05: [https://projectreporter.nih.gov/project\\_info\\_history.cfm?aid=9745695&icde=51049379](https://projectreporter.nih.gov/project_info_history.cfm?aid=9745695&icde=51049379); NIH grant #

5R01NS092383-05 [https://projectreporter.nih.gov/project\\_info\\_history.cfm?aid=9881360&icde=51049379](https://projectreporter.nih.gov/project_info_history.cfm?aid=9881360&icde=51049379)

<sup>9</sup> <https://titus.house.gov/in-the-news/latimes-los-angeles-va-ends-testing-on-narcoleptic-dogs>

As you know, a landmark National Academies report recently determined that most VA dog testing is unnecessary. Likewise, we are concerned that the VA's use of cats for invasive and terminal taxpayer-funded research may not be warranted.

In light of these concerns, we respectfully request that your office provide us with the following information:

1. A list of all active VA cat experimentation projects. Please include:
  - A. project titles and abstracts
  - B. original approval date, most recent renewal date, and projected end date
  - C. approved budget and total cost to date (by fiscal year and funding source)
  - D. VA location
  - E. USDA pain category
  - F. explanation of how the cat study is "directly related to an illness or injury that is combat-related," as is now required by law.
2. Have all the listed projects undergone secondary review and received your written approval as required by federal law and the VA's own internal policy (AR2017-001)?<sup>10</sup> If so, when? If not, when will each be due for such a review?
3. Have any new VA cat experiments been approved, or existing projects re-approved, since October 1, 2019, the date after which all such projects must be submitted to Congress upon receiving your approval? If so, which projects and when?
4. Has the VA discontinued any cat experiments since the implementation of policy AR2017-001 (Rev. 1) in May 2018?
5. Do you anticipate the approval of any new cat experiments in the foreseeable future? Please provide details on those experiments.
6. What efforts are being made by the VA to develop and/or implement alternatives to cat use in these studies and others?

Thank you for your attention to this matter. Should you have any questions, please contact Christine Godinez ([Christine.Godinez@mail.house.gov](mailto:Christine.Godinez@mail.house.gov)) in the office of Congresswoman Dina Titus and Julian Fleischman ([Julian.Fleischman@mail.house.gov](mailto:Julian.Fleischman@mail.house.gov)) in the office of Congressman Brian Mast.

Sincerely,



Dina Titus  
Member of Congress



Brian Mast  
Member of Congress

Eleanor Holmes Norton  
Member of Congress

Nydia M. Velázquez  
Member of Congress

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<sup>10</sup> [https://www.research.va.gov/programs/animal\\_research/CanineFelineNHP.pdf](https://www.research.va.gov/programs/animal_research/CanineFelineNHP.pdf)

Henry C. "Hank" Johnson, Jr.  
Member of Congress

Matt Gaetz  
Member of Congress

Joe Neguse  
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Cheri Bustos  
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Juan Vargas  
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