

quickly result in an end to repression or free elections. But I am confident that, in a lot less than 50 years, the Cuban people will have a lot more freedom than they have had for the past 50 years.

Consider for a moment what it would mean if we did what these Senators advocate. Not only would we have no ambassador in Cuba, to be consistent, we would have no ambassador in China, Vietnam, Russia, South Sudan, Egypt, Ethiopia, or in any number of other countries where human rights are routinely violated, where political opponents, journalists, and human rights defenders are imprisoned and tortured, where there is no such thing as a fair trial, where civil society organizations are threatened and harassed, and where dissent is severely punished.

Is that what the Senators want, or are they just concerned about human rights in Cuba? Their argument is as illogical as it is inconsistent.

The purpose of an ambassador is to represent the interests of the U.S. Government and the American people. Appointing a U.S. Ambassador is not a reward to a foreign government, any more than their ambassadors are a reward to our government. Do the Senators think that our ambassador in Russia is a reward to President Putin, or that having an ambassador in Moscow somehow conveys that we agree with President Putin's corrupt, repressive policies? Does anyone think that Russia's ambassador is somehow a reward to the Obama administration? Or that our ambassador in Vietnam legitimizes the repressive policies of that government? Does anyone think that the Cuban Government regards its ambassador here as a reward to us?

Let's be sensible. The United States has interests in every country, even if it is just to stand up for the rights of Americans who travel, study, or work overseas. But there are many other reasons like promoting trade and investment, protecting national security and public health, and supporting educational and cultural exchange.

We could do as these Senators urge and downgrade our diplomatic presence and withdraw our ambassadors from every country where there is a repressive government. That, of course, would mean that our lower-ranking diplomats would be relegated to meeting with foreign officials of lesser rank than ambassador.

And, of course, those governments, like Cuba, they would still have their ambassadors in Washington, with access to officials of comparable rank in our government. Would that help us advocate for U.S. interests, for U.S. values, for the American people?

We either believe in diplomacy or we don't. We either empower our diplomats or we don't. The Cubans, after a year of difficult negotiations, agreed to reopen embassies. Now, with their ambassador here conducting business, we are somehow better off without an ambassador there? Of course not.

I understand that this is an emotional issue for some Cuban-American families. But after 55 years, Cuban-Americans overwhelmingly support the new policy of engagement. They want the U.S. to have an ambassador in Havana.

There is a time for family politics, and there is time for what is in the interest of the nation as a whole. Ambassadors serve the national interest, and that is what Jeff DeLaurentis would do, and he would do so as a career diplomat with years of experience.

Finally, I want to quote from Alan Gross, who as we all know, spent 5 long years in a Cuban prison. This is what Mr. Gross said about Mr. DeLaurentis's nomination: "I advocate for the appointment of a U.S. Ambassador to Cuba and I have a very high regard for Ambassador Jeff DeLaurentis. Had there been diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Cuba in December 2008, a U.S. Ambassador could have prevented the loss of five years of my life. Any one in Congress who opposes this nomination goes against the best interests of the United States."

We should listen to Alan Gross. He suffered in Cuba, as do thousands of Americans imprisoned overseas. They depend on our ambassadors to assist and advocate for them, just as we would if it were a member of our families.

I urge these Senators to put what is in the interests of the American people over their personal interests and to not obstruct the confirmation of Jeff DeLaurentis, a superbly qualified nominee, from becoming ambassador to Cuba.

TRIBUTE TO GENERAL GORDON SULLIVAN

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, earlier this summer, GEN Gordon Sullivan, a man who has dedicated his life to caring for and developing world-class leaders, retired from his role as chairman of the Norwich University Board of Trustees, a position he held for 13 years. At the same time, he retired from his role as president of the Association of the United States Army, a post he held for 18 years.

General Sullivan's lifetime of service began in 1959, when he earned his degree in political science from Norwich University and assumed a commission in the Army as a second lieutenant of armor. Like so many from this prestigious Vermont institution, he went on to excel among his peers. He completed two distinguished tours in Vietnam, earning the Purple Heart. General Sullivan could have justifiably concluded his military service then, and his contributions to that point would have been impressive, but he continued to serve, and in clear recognition of his tireless devotion to soldiers, he was eventually appointed as the Army's top officer.

As the 32nd Army Chief of Staff, General Sullivan directed a post-Cold War

downsizing that spanned the administrations of two U.S. Presidents. These transitional years saw unprecedented reorganization within the Department, occurring amid ongoing, complex global peacekeeping operations. By continuing to prioritize the men and women he was tasked with leading, General Sullivan navigated this critical era with a skill and tact that few can match. In 1995, he retired from the Army to begin a new chapter.

In 1998, General Sullivan began his tenure as president of the Association of the United States Army, AUSA, the Nation's largest Army-oriented, non-profit organization. As president of the association, he was known for focusing efforts on improving conditions for soldiers and their families. General Sullivan served as head of AUSA while maintaining close ties to Norwich University, and that connection was further solidified in 2003 when he became chairman of the Norwich University Board of Trustees.

As chairman of the board, he directed and supervised countless improvements to the university, while always adhering to Norwich's core values. During his 13 years leading the board, General Sullivan assisted with the meticulous design of the school's 2019 plan. His influence helped bring about some of the most significant improvements in Norwich's history, including the expansion of student housing, academic resources, and athletic facilities. Perhaps most notably, he played an integral role in building the school's reputation as an internationally known center for education in cyber security. Like Norwich's founder, Captain Alden Partridge, General Sullivan has contributed to Vermont and our Nation's academic prosperity in so many ways.

I would like to recognize GEN Gordon Sullivan for his contributions to Norwich University, the Army, and the Nation as a whole. It gives me great pride to know that General Sullivan benefited so strongly from a Vermont-based education, and I know that our State has benefited from a longtime relationship with him. I am confident that General Sullivan's contributions will continue, and I wish him well as he further expands his already proud and accomplished legacy.

CONTINUING RESOLUTION

Mr. KIRK. Mr. President, today we have made great progress in protecting whistleblowers and veterans at Veterans Affairs hospitals across the country by passing the fiscal year 2017 Military Construction—Veterans Affairs Appropriations Conference Agreement, which includes S. 2291, VA Patient Protection Act. This bill provides protection for the protectors of our veterans, the whistleblowers, who are shedding light on the egregious acts of some employees at VA hospitals across the country. Unfortunately, one of those hospitals is the Edwards Hines Jr. Veterans Affairs Medical Center in my State of Illinois.

Today I sent a letter to Veterans Affairs Secretary Robert McDonald regarding the most recent injustice uncovered by whistleblowers at the Hines VA.

Whistleblowers brought to my attention that the remains of indigent veterans and those without next of kin are often left in the Hines VA morgue for over a month, sometimes longer, without proper postmortem care. The whistleblowers, who wish to remain anonymous for fear of retaliation and losing their jobs, brought forward information identifying Mr. Christopher Wirtjes, chief, patient administrative services at Hines VA, as the person responsible for this blatant disregard of a veteran's right for a timely and dignified burial. I have asked the Secretary to fire Mr. Wirtjes for failure to perform his duties. In addition to this latest trespass against veterans at Hines VA, Mr. Wirtjes was the only manager identified in the VA's own inspector general investigation as the mastermind behind directing staff to manipulate wait times for appointments at Hines VA.

Whistleblowers provide an important service of reporting waste, fraud, and abuse of veterans care. In fact, whistleblower disclosures play a pivotal role in promoting accountability and better health care for veterans at the VA. However, whistleblowers at Hines VA tell me retaliation continues despite the whistleblower protections in place. This is why I am pleased the continuing resolution that passed the Senate today overwhelmingly includes my bipartisan VA Patient Protection Act, which increases penalties for those who retaliate against whistleblowers, creates a formal process for whistleblowers to file claims at the VA, and establishes a central whistleblower office to investigate all whistleblower claims.

Just as no servicemember is left behind on the battlefield, no veteran should ever be left in a morgue or placed on a secret wait list for health care appointments. I thank the brave whistleblowers who come forward to protect our veterans. I also reiterate to Secretary McDonald, do the right thing and fire Mr. Wirtjes now.

Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to have my letters dated September 1, 2016, and September 28, 2016, printed in the RECORD.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

U.S. SENATE,

Washington, DC, September 1, 2016.

Hon. ROBERT A. McDONALD,
Department of Veterans Affairs,
Washington, DC.

DEAR SECRETARY McDONALD: It has been brought to my attention by a whistleblower that the Edward Hines, Jr. Veterans Affairs Hospital has failed to treat the remains of unclaimed and indigent veterans with dignity and ensured burial within a reasonable amount of time. Specifically, whistleblowers report there are currently two veterans who have been left in the Hines morgue for over

a month. The graphic details of what happens to these remains without timely post mortem care is sickening and shameful. Your support to uncover the truth and protection for the employees who came forward on behalf of veterans is imperative.

The Veterans Health Administration Handbook 1601B.04 states that "if a Veteran dies . . . at a VA facility under authorized admission . . . and the Veteran's remains are unclaimed, the facility Director will request funeral and burial services to be procured through a contract."

I am asking, on behalf of all veterans at Hines VA, if a service contract with an established funeral home or two would allow for the timely transport of unclaimed or indigent veterans' remains to be prepared for burial and laid to rest. Whistleblowers also suggest the service relationships between Hines VA and some local funeral homes no longer exist because of the health risk posed by the extreme decomposition of remains after being stored for so long without post mortem care.

Finally, I would like information on the federal funds made available by the annual Military Construction and Veterans Affairs appropriations bill for the seamless transfer of unclaimed or indigent veterans' remains to local funeral homes. Ignoring the law or misusing funds is a clear disregard to the VA's standard operation procedure and possibly illegal.

Every hero who serves in our U.S. Armed Forces deserves a dignified final farewell from a grateful nation. To learn these veterans remains have been sitting in the morgue for over a month, sometimes longer, without proper post mortem care, is unacceptable and unjustifiable.

Just as no servicemember is ever left behind on the battlefield, no veteran should ever be left behind in morgue.

Therefore I ask for your immediate attention to correct this disgrace, demand that the two veterans who are currently in the morgue promptly receive a proper and respectful burial, and take appropriate disciplinary action against the person or persons responsible for letting this happen. I also ask that you launch a review of VA hospitals across the country to ensure that this mistreatment of our heroes' remains is not happening elsewhere.

Thank you for your immediate attention to this matter. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

MARK KIRK,
U.S. Senator.

U.S. SENATE,

Washington, DC, September 28, 2016.

Hon. ROBERT A. McDONALD,
Department of Veterans Affairs,
Washington, DC.

DEAR SECRETARY McDONALD: As follow up to our phone conversation last week, I write to reiterate that you should use your ability as the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to terminate Mr. Christopher Wirtjes from his post at Edward Hines Jr. VA Hospital in Hines, Illinois.

As I wrote to you on September 1, 2016, whistleblowers came to me last month reporting that the remains of indigent veterans, or those without next of kin, were left in the Hines VA morgue for inappropriate amounts of time following their death. At times, the remains of these veterans were left to badly decompose in the Hines morgue for upwards of 30 plus days before being properly released to a local funeral home for a dignified burial or cremation. At the time of my letter, the remains of two veterans had sat in the Hines VA morgue without any post mortem care for over 45 days. This is unacceptable.

These whistleblowers, who wish to remain anonymous for fear of retaliation and losing their jobs, brought forward information identifying Mr. Wirtjes, Chief, Patient Administrative Services (PAS), as the person responsible for this unacceptable situation. Mr. Wirtjes, according to whistleblowers, fails to do his duty of ensuring timely and respectful burials for our indigent veterans, and veterans without next of kin. Emails provided to my office show efforts by VA staff to get proper and timely approval of paperwork failed, despite available funds and an internal operating procedure to procure payment that is known and should be in place. The whistleblowers also state Mr. Wirtjes does not have a contract with an established funeral home to transport the unclaimed remains to be prepared for burial, per normal operating procedure.

I find this behavior unacceptable and another exhausting example of a culture of malfeasance and corruption at Hines.

This is not the first time Mr. Wirtjes has failed to perform his duties. The Office of Special Counsel's letter to the President from February 25, 2016 specifically named him as the manager who directed staff to manipulate patient appointments, directed staff to zero out patient wait times and directed the use of a separate Excel spreadsheet to track appointments. This resulted in a false appearance of acceptable wait times and masked significant delays in veterans' access to care.

Specifically, the Office of Special Counsel Analysis titled OSC File No. DI-14-2762 (Hines VA Hospital, Chicago, Illinois) regarding the VA's Office of Inspector General (OIG) investigations on manipulated wait times raised by whistleblowers states that the VA "OIG found only one manager, patient administrative services (PAS) chief Christopher Wirtjes, responsible for implementing these improper practices."

As a result, Mr. Wirtjes was merely given a 14-day administrative leave for his role in the scheduling manipulations. To add insult to injury, whistleblowers have informed my office that Mr. Wirtjes responded to this punishment by taking an additional 2-week vacation and upon his return continuously bragged about his VA commissioned "vacation."

The OSC analysis also stated that the OIG investigation confirmed that a senior manager instructed schedulers to manipulate scheduling data to hide the actual wait times experienced by veterans, however it provided no information on how the manipulations impacted veterans, and failed to provide corrective action. Is Mr. Wirtjes continuing to direct schedulers to manipulate wait times for care at Hines VA?

While manipulating the wait time for several departments according to the VA's own OIG investigation is unspeakable, continuing to leave in place a corrupt and inept chain of command to continue to harm our veterans, like leaving our unclaimed and indigent veterans in the morgue, is unforgivable. I find it irresponsible that the VA has left the one manager finger pointed as the mastermind of the manipulated scheduling practices in a position to continue overseeing scheduling, patient administration, health information management and decedent affairs.

Mr. Wirtjes must be held accountable now. Otherwise the corrupt culture of the VA will be justified and encouraged.

You have the ability to fire VA employees for misconduct. Congress gave you that power in Public Law 113-146. If manipulating scheduling wait times putting veterans' health at risk and failing to allow the burial of unclaimed veterans' remains is not misconduct, then I ask you what is. If you cannot make this happen within the next 30

days then I would like an explanation to Congress and 700,000 Illinois veterans.

America was built on the sacrifices of our service members. And as a grateful nation, we are indebted to our veterans who unselfishly served to fight for the freedoms we enjoy. No veteran who has served should be left for weeks without a proper and dignified burial.

Sincerely,

MARK KIRK,
U.S. Senate.

THE ADVANCING HOPE ACT

Mr. CASEY. Mr. President, today I wish to speak about S. 1878, the Advancing Hope Act. This is a bill I introduced with the support of my Republican cosponsor, Senator JOHNNY ISAKSON. This is a bipartisan bill that brings hope to some of our most vulnerable citizens: children living with rare diseases.

Despite significant unmet medical need, private companies seldom pursue new therapies for rare diseases because it requires making an investment in products that will likely not recoup the high costs associated with their research, development, marketing, and distribution. Developing products for children is particularly challenging because of the difficulties associated with conducting clinical trials in this population.

So, several years ago, former Senator Brownback authored the Creating Hope Act with Senator SHERROD BROWN. In 2011, I became the Senate leader on this bill, which provided an incentive for drug developers to pursue therapies for rare pediatric diseases. The goal was to bring hope to the millions of American children living with a rare disease.

Provisions based on the Creating Hope Act were included in the Food and Drug Administration Safety and Innovation Act, which became law in 2012. The new FDA program established three "priority review vouchers" that would be awarded to companies who develop a new drug for a rare pediatric disease. A company that earns a voucher can then sell it to another company, which can use the voucher to speed up the FDA's review time for one of its own new drugs. Companies that earn and then sell their vouchers can use that money to fund additional drug development to treat rare pediatric diseases. So far, seven vouchers have been awarded, including on the 19th of this month.

However, the pediatric priority review program is due to expire on September 30, just days away. In fact, it would have expired in March of this year, but Congress passed an extension through the end of fiscal year 2016 as the House and Senate worked on legislation to extend and improve the program. In July of 2015, I introduced S. 1878, the Advancing Hope Act, with Senator ISAKSON, to extend the pediatric priority review program. We had extensive consideration of the bill in the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, which voted fa-

vorably on the Advancing Hope Act in April 2016. Thanks to an agreement we reached here in the Senate on September 21, we were able to pass S. 1878 with an extension of the program through the end of this year, which included important policy changes to the program. I would like to thank my colleagues for working with me on this agreement. I hope that we will be able to come to further agreement later this year for a longer extension to the program.

The pediatric priority review program is important for families, and a longer extension is warranted. If this program is allowed to lapse, Congress will have broken faith with these children with rare diseases.

Last year, I went to the Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh and met with the Rinaldi family. I met Jennie Rinaldi and her daughter Adelyn, who was receiving treatment at the hospital. Adelyn was born with congenital hypophosphatasia, an extremely rare bone disorder. There are only a handful of children in the world with this disease.

At the time, Adelyn was receiving an experimental therapy for her condition. That drug, Strensiq, was later approved by the FDA in October 2015, and the drug sponsor received a priority review voucher. Strensiq is the first drug to treat hypophosphatasia. There are no other options. It is now available commercially, and Adelyn continues to receive treatment.

Just imagine for a moment the uncertainty that families like the Rinaldis live with every day. We owe it to these families to give them the peace of mind in knowing that this important incentive for drug development will continue. We cannot let this program expire. I am pleased that the House passed S. 1878 yesterday, and I hope that we can continue to work in good faith on a longer-term extension before the end of the year.

We need to provide certainty for drug developers so that they can count on this incentive when deciding to invest the time and money into drugs for rare pediatric diseases. We need to provide hope for the other children like Adelyn. On behalf of these children, we must incentivize companies to take on the challenges of developing new treatments for rare pediatric diseases.

LYME AND TICK-BORNE DISEASE PREVENTION, EDUCATION, AND RESEARCH ACT OF 2015

Ms. AYOTTE. Mr. President, today I wish to speak on the importance of passing legislation to address a serious issue that impacts New Hampshire, New England, and the rest of the country each year, the issue of Lyme and other tick-borne diseases.

This fall, as the leaves begin to turn and temperatures start to drop, millions of Americans will head outdoors to hike and otherwise experience the beauty of nature. In my home State of

New Hampshire, hiking is one of the State's most popular recreational activities. New Hampshire is also among the 14 States through which the Appalachian Trail runs. Stretching from Georgia to Maine, the Appalachian Trail spans nearly 2,190 miles, and is hiked annually by 2 to 3 million people.

While our attention in the Northeast usually turns to the dangers of ticks in the spring and summer months, adult blacklegged ticks, also known as deer ticks, are still active in the fall. Approximately half of these deer ticks carry Lyme disease, and they have played a leading role in our Nation's dramatic rise in tick-borne diseases. While approximately 30,000 cases of Lyme disease are reported annually by State health departments, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention CDC, the actual number of cases each year is about 300,000, making Lyme disease the most commonly reported vector-borne illness in the country. Underscoring that Lyme is no longer simply a regional problem, the CDC reports that the species of ticks that spread Lyme disease now live in 46 percent of the Nation's counties.

That is why I am continuing to urge my colleagues to join me in supporting the bipartisan Lyme and Tick-Borne Disease Prevention, Education, and Research Act, S. 1503. Working with Senator Blumenthal, I coauthored and introduced this legislation which is designed to better coordinate the Federal Government's response to Lyme and other tick-borne diseases by creating an advisory committee within the Department of Health and Human Services HHS. The committee established under our bill would be tasked with identifying best practices to combat tick-borne diseases and would be comprised of patients, advocates, researchers, medical professionals, and government officials. Our legislation would also require the HHS Secretary to coordinate efforts to strengthen disease surveillance and reporting, develop better diagnostic tools and tests, create a physician education program, establish epidemiological research objectives for Lyme and other tick-borne illnesses, and report to Congress on the progress of efforts to combat these devastating diseases.

The significant increase in cases of Lyme and other tick-borne diseases over the past decade is extremely troubling, and it demands a strong and coordinated effort at the Federal level. This critical legislation has been endorsed by nearly 100 Lyme and tick-borne disease patient groups, along with the Appalachian Trail Conservancy.

Despite the staggering statistics, the voices of those who are living and struggling with Lyme and other tick-borne diseases have not adequately been heard. Senator Blumenthal and I have put forth a commonsense, bipartisan legislative proposal that will bring greater attention to Lyme disease and give patients and their families a greater say in their care.