

WASHINGTON – Veterans' Affairs Secretary James Peake said today that he is "saddened" that his office has refused to provide U.S. Rep. Harry Mitchell with Department of Veterans' Affairs documents relating to veteran suicide, and instead suggested that Mitchell "go file a Freedom of Information Act request."

Peake made the comment in response to Mitchell's questions at today's House Veterans' Affairs Committee hearing, "The Truth About Veteran Suicides."

"I'm saddened to hear that someone would tell you to file a Freedom of Information Act Request," said Peake. "I don't know where that came from and I will tell you, I don't think that's appropriate... This is information you should be given."

On December 12, Mitchell submitted a document request regarding the VA's tracking of veteran suicides.

Five months later, the VA has yet to produce a single document relating to Mitchell's request.

"I've tried to be reasonable. I've tried to work with Secretary Peake's office. But, Mr. Chairman, my patience is at an end," said Mitchell at today's hearing. "I've given the Department until Friday to finally produce the documents I requested. If they do not, Mr. Chairman, I want you to know that I will be asking you to pursue a subpoena."

On April 24, Mitchell wrote Peake and said that if the VA fails to produce the documents by May 9, Mitchell will pursue other means of acquiring the documents.

Today, Peake said the VA will meet Mitchell's deadline.

"I will close the loop with you before Friday and give you what I think you are asking for," Peake said at the hearing.

Peake told Mitchell that last night – 145 days after Mitchell's request and just hours before Peake was scheduled to testify before Mitchell's committee – he attempted to call Mitchell to get more additional information about his request. Mitchell's office received a voice mail from the VA on its switchboard at 6:53 p.m. EST.

Recent news reports have shed light on the VA's willingness to provide documents relating to veteran suicide.

According to USA TODAY, "The CBS website showed internal e-mails written by Ira Katz, the VA's head of mental health, that estimated about 1,000 suicide attempts a month among veterans seen in VA facilities. CBS News reported that Katz appeared to go 'out of his way to conceal these numbers.'" [Source: USA TODAY, April 22, 2008]

CBS News uncovered an e-mail in which Katz wrote "Shh!" regarding releasing veteran suicide information to media outlets. [Source: CBS News]

Late last year, an investigation by CBS News uncovered a startling number of suicides among veterans. According to CBS' report, "In 2005... there were at least 6,256 suicides among those who served in the armed forces. That's 120 each and every week, in just one year." The report also revealed that the Department of Veterans' Affairs is not collecting data on veteran suicides. [Source: CBS News, Nov. 13, 2007]