

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-4803

The Honorable Robert A. McDonald
Secretary
United States Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave. NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

April XX, 2015

Dear Secretary McDonald:

As the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) continues to implement reforms that will guarantee timely access to care for our nation's veterans, we implore you to maintain a focus on the care of our rural veterans. We ask that you not only focus on care at VA medical facilities, but also on long-term care facilities, including VA-contracted facilities.

It is critical that veterans have access to VA Medical Facilities, necessary treatment, and long-term care facilities within a reasonable distance from their homes and their families. Although the VA contracts with nursing homes, some veterans still lack access to a locally-contracted facility and must either forego needed care or travel many miles away from their homes and loved ones.

In one instance, a veteran spent his 50th wedding anniversary 90 miles away from his wife, whom he only sees twice a year because of this long distance between their home and his nursing home. Ninety miles is a significant distance to expect a veteran and his disabled wife to travel in order to spend such a momentous occasion together. In another case, a rural veteran travels more than 130 miles roundtrip five times a month to receive his chemotherapy treatments. This veteran does not qualify for the choice program under current criteria because there is a VA clinic within 40 miles of his home. Unfortunately, this VA clinic does not offer the treatment he needs, forcing him to travel hours to receive chemotherapy.

In yet another case, a veteran suffered from a heart attack while on vacation and survived. He went to a VA clinic near his home for follow up, only to be told that the wait to see a cardiologist at the VA hospital – more than 150 miles from home – would be more than a month due to lack of staffing. The veteran was getting weaker, so he submitted a request to the VA to go to another non-veteran facility – which was denied because he was still within 40 miles of a VA clinic (one which does not have a cardiologist or cardiology services). After a second VA denial, the veteran ended up paying out of pocket to see a cardiologist at a nearby hospital, who found another blockage that was 70 percent blocked. The cardiologist told him that had he not come when he did, he would likely have suffered another massive heart attack.

We applaud your efforts to reform the system of care for our nation's veterans, who deserve nothing less than first-class care. We request information on what actions the VA is taking to alleviate the obstacles that rural veterans face in finding necessary and long-term care close to their families and homes. As you continue to increase access to care for our veterans, we urge you to prioritize the care of our nation's veterans living in rural areas.

We appreciate your response to our concerns.

Sincerely,

Evan Jenkins
Member of Congress

Elise Stefanik
Member of Congress

Bruce Poliquin
Member of Congress

Brad Ashford
Member of Congress

Mike Bishop
Member of Congress

Carlos Curbelo
Member of Congress

Glenn Grothman
Member of Congress

Jody Hice
Member of Congress

Brenda Lawrence
Member of Congress


Mia Love
Member of Congress