

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-1504
October 25, 2021

The Honorable Denis McDonough
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
U.S Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Secretary McDonough:

I write today urging the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to ensure that rural veterans are receiving the compassion, access to care, and quality treatment that they deserve.

I was sworn into office on January 3, 2021. Since then, I have heard from an overwhelming number of veterans in my district who feel forgotten by the system. My district has 39 counties, but only four VA clinics. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, a veteran seeking a mental health appointment must wait an average of 27 days. This blatant lack of adequate care for veterans in my district after the events in Afghanistan is incomprehensible to me. My office has been working with veterans whose cases range from being told to endure their ailments for months at a time, being forced to travel over 50 miles for their treatment, and a lack of mental health treatment and compassion after the fall of Afghanistan. No matter the case, the gap in the system that rural veterans are falling into is unacceptable.

I am aware of the current Community Care option that allows veterans to see private health care providers. Yet, I also hear about constant issues with reimbursing these providers for their care. These issues have caused providers in my district to stop seeing veterans because they are having to wait four - six weeks to be reimbursed. The lack of organization and transparency in this process is shameful and lets down our veterans who depend on these services for care. I appreciate the concept of providing reimbursement incentives to help private providers care for the veterans in their community, but incentives to help veterans only work if the incentives are consistent and reliable. The current Community Care program is neither.

I understand that in an October 5 letter to members on the House Veterans' Affairs Committee you laid out your plan to decommission the Office of Community Care and the Office for Veterans Access to Care and establish the Office for Integrated Veteran Care because of the opportunities for improvement that were given to you in 2015 report by the Government Accountability Office (GAO). It is my sincere hope that you take the findings of this report, as well as the 2020 Veterans Health Administration report findings, to build a better system for all that need it, while closing the existing gaps in the current system.

On October 13, I was made aware of a new resource for those impacted from the fall of Afghanistan called the "Independence Line." I am hopeful that this resource will be beneficial to those who need all the support, care, and compassion that can be given to ensure that they know their service mattered. I am genuinely frustrated to find that veterans in my district feel that the VA is treating them with a lack of decency. I am sure you must feel the same way.

Based on the issues and gaps in the system that I have outlined in this letter, I request an answer to the following questions.

1. How will the Office for Integrated Veteran Care minimize the wait times veterans in my district face?
2. What is being done to streamline the reimbursement process, so more health care providers opt into this system?
3. Is the Independence Line being considered a substitute for mental health care for veterans of Afghanistan and Iraq?

As you bring about your new policy plan and start establishing the Office for Integrated Veteran Care, please consider that rural veterans require -and deserve- a thoughtful approach to treatment. Time and time again, the VA has accommodated larger health care systems, while leaving behind areas who rely on smaller health care providers. Veterans who live in rural districts like mine deserve access to quality health care.

Sincerely,



Randy Feenstra
Member of Congress