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October 18, 2021

The Honorable Denis R. McDonough
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough,

We write today to inquire about the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) emergency cache system, its efficacy during the COVID-19 pandemic, and your plans for the cache system moving forward. We appreciate how VA's well-informed and sustained response to the COVID-19 pandemic helped save veteran lives and assisted civilian hospitals in need. In keeping with VA's Fourth Mission, the Department must be prepared to handle national emergencies, both through the use of emergency caches and other available means, at any time.

VA's emergency cache program is designed to provide VA with emergency medical supplies in the immediate aftermath of a catastrophic event – such as a natural disaster or public health emergency – to assist VA or local and state partners in their response. These caches are only designed to last 24-48 hours until a broader federal response takes effect, but that time period is important when addressing a crisis. A June 2021 report by the VA Office of the Inspector General (OIG), *Use and Oversight of the Emergency Caches were Limited during the First Wave of the COVID-19 Pandemic*, detailed the use of emergency caches during the pandemic, and outlined steps VA can take to improve the emergency cache system to ensure they can be used to their full potential moving forward. We stand prepared to work with VA to ensure a mission-ready posture at all times.

A primary area of concern for us is that some of the cache issues experienced during the COVID-19 crisis had been previously flagged by the OIG just a few years ago. In the October 2018 OIG report, *Emergency Cache System: Ineffective Management Impairs Mission Readiness*, the OIG found VA was not effectively managing the cache system so that supplies could be readily available for use in an emergency. VA agreed with five of the seven recommendations in the report, and concurred in principle to the remaining two, and yet failed to implement some recommendations in a meaningful way. This contributed to failures during the COVID-19 crisis related to the availability and usage of the emergency cache system. For example, the 2018 report found expired supplies in the caches, an issue that has persisted throughout the ongoing pandemic and hindered the usefulness of the caches. Has VA since addressed all of the recommendations from the 2018 report?

Emergency caches can be activated to address critical shortages at VA facilities. In the 2021 report, we were alarmed to learn that in several facilities, the OIG found chief logistics officers who are in charge of emergency caches were unaware of the existence of the caches, and others who were unaware of their contents. Several also admitted that, had they known about the caches' existence and contents, they might have used the caches when supplies were running low during the pandemic. One example from the 2021 OIG report explained how a VA facility made an employee drive 90 miles to collect hand sanitizer because facility leaders were unaware of the extra supply on hand in the facility's emergency cache. This is particularly concerning given VA agreed to recommendation five of the 2018 OIG report to improve the overall management of the emergency cache system. What specific changes did VA make to the oversight of these caches following the 2018 report? Why did these changes fail to fully address the issues outlined in 2018? What does VA intend to do to ensure that these caches are being monitored and kept prepared for emergency use moving forward?

VA activated emergency caches ten times during the pandemic, although in several of those instances staff found the items in the caches to be mislabeled or expired. Furthermore, the OIG inspected 144 caches and found that only one cache was found to have fully up-to-date supplies. VA must do a better job of developing and implementing a system to ensure medications and equipment are being replaced *prior* to their expiration dates. N95 masks in one of the caches examined had been expired for two years before a replacement order was requested in July 2020, well into the COVID-19 pandemic. The OIG also found VA facilities failed to adequately document the activation of the caches during the pandemic, which can hinder inventory management and future emergency response. What will VA do to address recommendations two and three of the 2021 report in a timely manner and how will VA ensure that emergency cache contents, and their expiration dates, are accounted for in a uniform manner?

VA is able to use emergency caches to help address critical supply shortages, which VA facilities experienced throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. On multiple occasions, VA opted to move supplies between facilities to meet shortages rather than activate emergency caches. We are pleased VA was able to be flexible in utilizing supplies, and once again would like to reiterate our belief that VA effectively worked to prevent supply shortages and overcome hurdles posed by the pandemic. The OIG noted constraints in activation and lack of understanding the emergency caches contained supplies helpful to address the pandemic were among the reasons the activation rates were so low. With the ongoing development of regional readiness centers to manage and provide supplies, there appears to be another way for VA to address shortages without activating emergency caches. What is the long-term plan for the emergency cache system at VA facilities and its expected use?

The emergency cache system was used sparingly throughout the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This is in large part due to a lack of necessity as VA was mostly able to maintain an adequate level of supplies throughout the crisis. However, we believe that if properly maintained and reported, the emergency cache system provides important reserves for VA facilities, and can help VA maintain its obligations to our veterans and the nation as a whole. We look forward to hearing how VA plans to improve its use and management of the emergency cache system, and how the Department foresees the role of the cache system moving forward.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jon Tester". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Jon Tester
Chairman
Committee on Veterans' Affairs

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jerry Moran". The signature is written in a bold, blocky style.

Jerry Moran
Ranking Member
Committee on Veterans' Affairs