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# United States Senate

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June 4, 2020

The Honorable Robert Wilkie  
Secretary of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Ave, NW  
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Wilkie,

We write today to urge the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to do more to help homeless veterans during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. The first step should be at minimum to test each homeless veteran residing in a shelter nationwide. We encourage you to build this into a nationwide testing strategy that includes regular testing of all homeless veterans, which the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has emphasized as vital to controlling the spread of COVID-19. Homeless veterans are some of the most at-risk for COVID-19 complications, and live in conditions that make them much more likely to contract the virus. VA has already shown it has the ability to test and care for at-risk veterans – the Department's efforts in caring for veterans in State Veterans Homes (SVHs) and community nursing homes has saved lives. And VA has already taken up Fourth Mission assignments to assist homeless veterans – providing homeless outreach and screening in the New Haven community. Homeless veterans are some of the most vulnerable individuals in this outbreak, and deserve the same care and support that VA provides other at-risk veterans.

Unfortunately, comprehensive coronavirus testing across the United States has not been available until recent weeks, and even now there are still areas where testing criteria and a lack of equipment make it difficult to obtain a diagnostic test. This problem is even worse in homeless shelters and homeless encampments, where homeless veterans are disproportionately exposed and at-risk of complications. On April 22, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR) reported on COVID-19 infection rates among homeless shelter residents and staff at homeless shelters in King County, Washington. The report found that 18 percent of shelter residents and 21 percent of staff members tested positive for COVID-19. Another MMWR released the same day looked at COVID-19 cases in homeless shelters in Boston, San Francisco, Seattle, and Atlanta and found that in total, a quarter of homeless residents and 11 percent of staff members tested positive for COVID-19. Further research published by the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) on April 27 found that, at a homeless shelter in Boston, 36 percent of the residents tested positive. Based on these CDC and JAMA reports, it is clear that homeless shelters can become hotbeds for COVID-19 transmission, threatening the health of residents and staff alike.

On his May 15, 2020 weekly update call, Veterans Health Administration Executive-in-Charge Dr. Richard Stone said that VA had tested more than 5,000 veterans in SVHs or private nursing homes and removed many of them to VA-run Community Living Centers (CLCs) if they tested positive for COVID-19. Similarly, on his May 1, 2020 call, Dr. Stone said that VA had tested all veterans living in CLCs and spinal cord injury units. VA has shown that it has the capacity and manpower to test and care for veterans both in SVHs and CLCs, and it is time for VA to offer that same care for homeless veterans.


To stop the spread of COVID-19, it is critical that VA provide proactive outreach and testing to all homeless veterans across the country, and subsequently provide them isolated housing and treatment, including inpatient care if necessary. Understanding the scope of the COVID-19 outbreak and caring for our homeless veterans goes hand-in-hand, and we are committed to working with you to ensure that homeless veterans are getting access to the COVID-19 testing that they need.

Sincerely,




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Jon Tester  
United States Senator




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Bernard Sanders  
United States Senator



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Sherrod Brown  
United States Senator



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Richard Blumenthal  
United States Senator




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Mazie K. Hirono  
United States Senator



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Joe Manchin III  
United States Senator



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Kyrsten Sinema  
United States Senator