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December 21, 2022

The Honorable Denis R. McDonough
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough,

I write today to urge the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to upgrade the Helena Vet Center Outstation in Helena, Montana, to a full-service Vet Center. I have heard from veterans in the Helena area that the demand for Vet Center services is outpacing the availability of appointments and providers at the Helena Vet Center Outstation. For rural states like Montana, mental health access is a critical priority. Montana veterans, servicemembers, and their families require timely access to the essential mental health care and readjustment counseling services Vet Centers provide.

As the sixth most populous city in Montana, a state with the second highest percentage of veterans in the country, Helena requires the benefits of a full-service Vet Center to meet the needs of its veteran and servicemember population. Helena is also home to the Montana Army National Guard, many members of the Reserve Components, and their families, all of whom are eligible to receive services at Vet Centers. Many Reservists are also newly eligible for Vet Center services due to the CARE for Reservists Act, which was signed into law in January 2021, as part of Public Law 116-283. Veterans, servicemembers, and their families in the Helena area have earned and deserve access to the timely appointments and expanded programming provided at a full-service Vet Center.

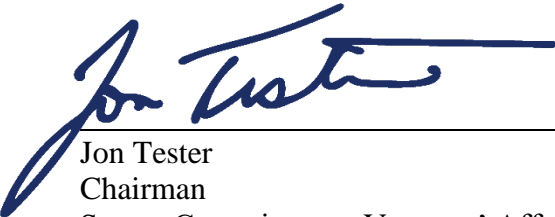
Upgrading the Helena Vet Center Outstation to a full-service Vet Center would also provide greatly-needed relief for providers serving veterans at the current Outstation. The change in status to a full-service Vet Center would mean an increase in full-time equivalent employees, which would take some of the burden off of current Outstation staff, who are often fully booked and unable to take on new patients in a timely manner. Additionally, an upgrade to a full-service Vet Center would allow the facility to hire outreach staff, who would be able to promote Vet Center services to eligible individuals in the Helena area – including Reservists newly eligible for Vet Center services under the CARE for Reservists Act. Further, upgrading the Helena Vet Center Outstation to a full-service Vet Center would allow the facility to provide more evening and weekend hours beyond their current 8:00am to 4:30pm Monday to Friday schedule. This would be especially helpful in expanding care options to veterans and servicemembers in the Helena area whose job schedules limit their access to care.

In addition to urging for the upgrade of the Helena Vet Center Outstation, I also have several questions regarding the process by which any Vet Center Outstation may be upgraded to a full-service Vet Center.

- VHA Directive 1500(2) states the Readjustment Counseling Service's (RCS) decision to expand the services of a Vet Center Outstation "is based on a demand model that considers utilization rates and service needs."
 - What specific metrics are used to determine whether a Vet Center Outstation is eligible for an upgrade to a full-service Vet Center?
 - What threshold in these metrics must a Vet Center Outstation reach to be considered for an upgrade to a full-service Vet Center?
 - Please provide the relevant metrics for the Helena Vet Center Outstation, as well as a determination of whether this location meets the threshold for an upgrade to a full-service Vet Center based on these metrics.
- Who is responsible for initiating an analysis of whether a Vet Center Outstation is eligible for an upgrade to a full-service Vet Center? Is this process initiated by a Vet Center Director, Vet Center district leadership, or RCS national leadership?
- Has anyone at VA already begun the process of monitoring the Helena Outstation for a potential upgrade, or planning an upgrade?
- How frequently are Vet Center Outstations evaluated for possible upgrades to full-service Vet Centers?
- What is the average length of time between determining there is a need for a Vet Center Outstation to be upgraded and approving the Outstation for an upgrade?
- What is the average length of time between approving an upgrade and transitioning the Outstation to a full-service Vet Center?

Vet Centers play a crucial role in providing mental health care, readjustment and family counseling, employment assistance, military sexual trauma counseling, and other services to veterans, servicemembers, and their families outside of traditional VA health care facilities. Montana veterans and servicemembers I have spoken with particularly value the confidentiality and privacy of Vet Center care. Depending on Helena's eligibility based on the metrics requested above, I urge you to consider upgrading the Helena Vet Center Outstation to a full-service Vet Center to ensure more Montanans are provided access to this critical resource. Additionally, I look forward to your response to my questions regarding the general process for upgrading a Vet Center Outstation.

Sincerely,



Jon Tester
Chairman
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs