

United States Senate

August 20, 2024

Duane Gill
Executive Director
Montana VA Health Care System
3867 Veterans Drive
Fort Harrison, MT 59636

Dear Mr. Gill,

I write today to encourage Montana VA Health Care System (VA Montana) leadership to continue to prioritize culturally-competent health care for Native American veterans, and ensure information about these services is communicated to all Tribes and veterans across Montana.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has made strides in recent years to increase access for Native veterans, including implementing my legislation to waive copayments for Native veterans and delivering health care and benefits to all generations of toxic-exposed Native veterans with the *PACT Act*. VA Montana has also recently improved its collaboration with local Tribes and Montana Native American veterans. This includes hosting local *PACT Act* health and benefits fairs with the Tribes to improve awareness of VA services, building a sweat lodge on its Fort Harrison campus, and requiring cultural competency training for many of its staff.

However, I am concerned by recent reports that accessing the sweat lodge has been challenging for some veterans, and there are still instances of staff lacking understanding and respect when working with Montana Native veterans. VA Montana must ensure that processes and procedures for accessing the sweat lodge are clear and equitable for all Native veterans. All employees, clinical and non-clinical, should be required to accomplish cultural competency training to ensure they are treating all veterans at VA Montana with respect.

VA Montana's increased engagement with Native veterans and Tribes in Montana has been evident in the forthcoming re-opening of the VA clinic in Browning after years of advocacy from local veterans and my office. Patient care must resume at the clinic as soon as possible and I encourage VA Montana to continue exploring opportunities to collaborate with Tribes and Native veterans to ensure culturally-competent care at the Browning facility and all of VA Montana's facilities.

Thank you for your attention to these requests and for your continued efforts to improve VA access to Native American veterans in Montana.

Sincerely,



Jon Tester
Chairman
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs