

United States Senate

June 26, 2024

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

Dear Mr. Secretary,

I write today in support of the continued expansion of Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) research efforts in rural America, including the establishment of a new research site in Montana. One of VA's statutory missions is to "support research to benefit veterans and the larger society," and studies funded through the Office of Research and Development (ORD) should include the perspective of all veterans, especially those in rural America and Montana, who face unique barriers to accessing their earned health care.

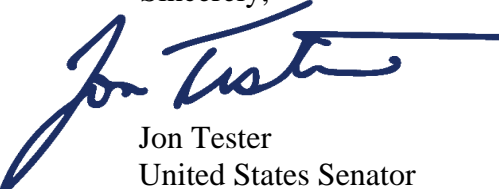
Despite having the second highest number of veterans per capita, Montana remains one of only three states without an operating ORD funded research site. This has significantly limited access to clinical trials, new technologies, and deprived rural veterans of fair representation in VA research. Given this, I was greatly encouraged by the recent announcement that Montana had been granted "conditional approval" for a research site. Montana veterans are disproportionately likely to experience mental health conditions, and are more likely to die by suicide, further emphasizing both the critical need to conduct research in our rural and frontier communities and the impact that research could have on veterans' health outcomes. Will the research efforts in Montana include mental health care? And what is the expected timeline for the establishment of this site and beginning of its first project?

VA must ensure the research team at VA Montana is adequately supported. Outreach to the community, including to academic affiliates and non-profit corporations, should not be overlooked as a means of supporting and funding research efforts. It is critical this site supplements other efforts within the state to treat hard-to-reach veterans, and expands rural representation in health care research and access to new and novel treatments for these folks. How is VA planning to support this research site, both from a financial and staffing perspective?

VA has done an exceptional job identifying veteran-specific areas for scientific examination, and ORD has been the driving force behind many medical breakthroughs over the years. And when we support research in the veterans' community, we see results that improve the lives of all Americans. Rural veterans, including those in Montana, must be included in research matters if VA intends to treat patients and address the unique challenges of individuals in these communities.

I look forward to frequent updates on the status of the Montana research site, and as Chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I will always work to support VA in its mission to provide for those who served our nation in uniform, no matter where they live.

Sincerely,



Jon Tester
United States Senator