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June 17, 2024

The Honorable Shereef Elnahal, MD
Under Secretary for Health
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Dr. Elnahal:

I write to express my concerns that the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Veterans Health Administration's (VHA) recently announced staffing reductions will hit hardest in rural areas like Montana and call on you and the Department to reverse them. Any effort to reduce hiring for high-demand mental health positions, especially those in rural areas, could have dire consequences on Montana veterans' access to health care and benefits. VA needs to focus on hiring more mental health care providers in rural America – not less.

I have heard directly from frontline VA employees, veterans, and Veterans Service Organizations, including those in Montana who are alarmed about VA's staffing plan. Earlier this year, the Department made assurances to Congress that any new staffing strategies would include continuing to hire mental health care providers—especially in rural areas. However, this is evidently not the case as more than 10 percent of the positions proposed to be cut just at VA Montana were providers or support staff directly related to mental health care.

Mental health is one of the biggest issues facing my state, and particularly our veterans. This decision to cut critical mental health positions at VA Montana is unjustifiable and unacceptable, especially in a state that ranked third highest in rate of deaths by suicide among veterans of any state in the nation. I urge you to prioritize the unique challenges of veterans and providers in rural America as you re-evaluate VHA's staffing strategy, and to not needlessly reduce access to care for veterans in rural America.

Veterans earned and deserve the best and most timely care regardless of where they live. Doing right by rural veterans requires VA to have the staff in place to serve each and every one of them in every corner of the state. A lot of work remains to honor our promises to these folks, and I will continue holding the Department accountable to honor those promises.

Sincerely,



Jon Tester
Chairman
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs