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April 1, 2024

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

Dear Mr. Secretary,

I write today to discuss concerns with the findings of the Department of Affairs' (VA) December 2023 Report on Transparency in Mental Health Care Services. Despite VA's department-wide focus on mental health and the progress made towards increasing eligibility and veteran access to mental health care over the last few years, the report states VA facilities do not have enough mental health services to meet veteran demand. More needs to be done, specifically in rural areas, to keep pace with increased demand and prevent gaps in care that can have dire impacts on veterans and their families.

In regions like Eastern Montana where availability of in-person providers and even connectivity to access telehealth are not certain, losing just one or two providers can have a massive impact on essential access to mental health care and once those providers are gone, it can take years to fill their vacancies and even longer to encourage those patients to return to care. This lost time and access can be life threatening.

Between Fiscal Years (FY) 2008 and 2023, the number of veterans who received mental health care services from the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) grew by 83% — an increase of more than three times the rate of all other VA health care services. According to the FY 2023 VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) severe occupational staffing shortages report, psychologists were the fourth top shortage position overall and psychiatrists were the top specialty physician shortage position. In-person mental health services are often clustered at large VA Medical Centers (VAMC) in urban areas and of the 9.10 million veterans enrolled in VHA in FY 2023, nearly one-third live in a rural area.

I understand the shortage of mental health care professionals is not solely a VA issue. The Department of Health & Human Services (HHS) reports that 122 million people are currently living in a mental health care professional shortage area and combined, those areas need 6,091 additional practitioners. Consequently, in many rural areas, VA cannot rely on its community provider network because VA is the only mental health care provider in the area. In the face of a mental health care provider shortage nationwide, VA must double down and lead the effort to address this crisis because we made a promise to provide timely health care to our veterans no matter where they are located.

A ProPublica article from earlier this year described how the lack of same day mental health care appointments at a rural Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) resulted in devastating consequences. The article details two separate tragedies that occurred within a two-day period in January 2022 involving veterans who contacted the Chico, California CBOC for mental health treatment. The staff at the Chico CBOC did not accurately assess the veterans' crisis levels and even if they had, the clinic was not equipped to offer or coordinate same day appointments to the veterans.

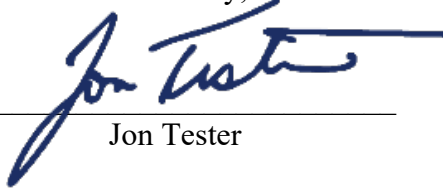
The allegations in the article are disturbing and an investigation by the OIG found, in violation of VA policy, the Chico CBOC lacked same-day appointments during that time period. According to policy, VA requires mental health services be provided when a patient has an "urgent need" for mental health services and that appointments are available for same-day crisis evaluation every day. While I understand the Chico CBOC now has several full-time mental health care providers and offers same-day appointments, I am concerned this was not an isolated issue considering VA's shortage of mental health care providers.

As part of your response to this letter, I ask that you provide answers to the following questions:

- 1) How many CBOCs currently lack an in-person mental health care provider? How many of those facilities are in rural and highly rural areas? Are these CBOCs equipped to facilitate telehealth appointments?
- 2) How does VHA monitor compliance with its Same Day Service policy at all medical facilities and what happens when Same Day appointments are unavailable?
- 3) In February 2022, VHA reported 79% of its medical facilities met the requirement to integrate mental health into primary care services. How many facilities are currently meeting the requirement? How does VHA monitor ongoing compliance?
- 4) The December 2023 VA Report on *Transparency in Mental Health Care Services* states VHA has established minimum staffing targets for individual medical facilities. Please provide a list of the minimum staffing targets and a brief explanation of the methodology used to develop the targets.
- 5) VHA reported hiring 4,200 mental health care providers from outside the VA health care system in FY 2023. VA's January 2024 announcement reporting it met its hiring goals and would not be focusing on widespread growth in Calendar Year 2024 noted that mental health care hiring is one of the exceptions. Please explain the process under which VA medical facilities will have the authority to recruit and hire additional mental health providers and how many new mental health providers VHA projects it will need to hire per year over the next three years to keep up with projected demand.
- 6) VHA recently reported instituting "access sprints" to increase appointment availability for health care. How many VA facilities are currently not in compliance with the timeliness standard – for new patient, non-crisis related mental health care appointments (wait time should not exceed 20 days) – released by VA in May of 2023? What options and resources are available to those facilities with an identified need to increase access to mental health care?

Again, I commend the Department for all of its efforts to decrease veterans' barriers to mental health care and bolster suicide prevention efforts. Nevertheless, VA must continue to lead the effort to increase the number of mental health providers and ensure those providers are in locations where veterans need them most. I look forward to working closely with you to continue to ensure Congress is providing VA with the resources and authorities it needs to carry out that mission.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jon Tester". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right. It is positioned above a thin horizontal line.

Jon Tester