



October 7, 2020

The Honorable Robert Wilkie, Jr.
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20571

Dear Secretary Wilkie:

Thank you for your commitment to caring for our nation's veterans. Under this Administration, efficiency and accountability within the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) have greatly improved and patient satisfaction within the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) continues to increase. There are, however, a number of issues within the VA that have been brought to my attention by my constituents. I hope to work with you and the rest of your team at the VA to find solutions that will address these long term issues.

First, I want to acknowledge the partnership that my office is developing with the Atlanta VA Health Care System (AVAHCS) Director Ann Brown. As you know, Director Brown inherited a disorganized system that was wrought with negligence. My office also has strong relationships with the Carl Vinson VA Medical Center (Carl Vinson VAMC) in Dublin, GA and the Charlie Norwood VA Medical Center in Augusta, GA. Of note, I was certainly pleased to hear about Director Whitmer's vision of the future of the Carl Vinson VVAMC during my visit there.

I am proud that nearly 700,000 veterans call Georgia home¹. These individuals and their families have sacrificed so much to protect our freedom, and it is our duty to ensure that they always receive quality care. Of this 700,000, too many are experiencing or are at imminent risk of experiencing homelessness². This is an absolutely tragic statistic, and one that brings with it unique challenges. These veterans often do not have a permanent address, and have more difficulty receiving benefits or having their claims processed by the VA. I hope that you will prioritize creating a process that ensures these veterans are not penalized with cancelled claims for not meeting the requirements of having a permanent address or phone number. I know that many veterans' organizations are eager to assist in this effort and hope that they can be a part of the solution.

Another issue that has been brought to my attention is a lack of cooperation between the VA and community care providers. These providers serve a critical need for veterans throughout the state that are unable to receive care at their local VA facility. While I was proud to support continued access to community care in the *VA MISSION Act of 2018* (S.2372), I remain concerned that community care providers have had issues being reimbursed by the VA. Delayed reimbursements can impact provider participation and will likely have an adverse impact on

¹ https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/SpecialReports/State_Summaries_Georgia.pdf

² <https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/5877/2019-pit-estimate-of-veteran-homelessness-in-the-us/>

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

access to care for veterans choosing to receive their care outside of the VA. While delayed reimbursements through the community care program are not a new issue for the VA, the impact of COVID-19 has made this issue even more serious and jeopardizes the number of community care participants. As your Department continues to implement the *VA MISSION Act*, I urge the VA to find a way to reimburse these providers in a more timely fashion. Doing so encourages participation in the program for providers and veterans, alike.

Lastly, as you work to consider the construction of additional VA facilities throughout the state, I respectfully request that the VA make a conscious effort to engage local stakeholders within the community. I understand that community engagement may be more challenging in the absence of a permanent VISN 7 Director, but my office stands willing to assist in facilitating community engagement moving forward. Furthermore, I appreciate that your Department took disciplinary action in response to the ant-infestation at the Atlanta VA Medical Center Eagle's Nest Community Living Center last fall. The absence of a permanent VISN 7 director has been detrimental to veterans in Georgia for many reasons, but it is very important that a new director have the confidence of the veterans they serve. For this reason, I hope that you will give consideration to candidates that meet that most important criterion.

Thank you for your continued commitment to our nation's veterans, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. I stand ready to work with you on the issues detailed in this letter, and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



David A. Perdue
United States Senator