

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

April 22, 2021

The Honorable Denis McDonough  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue, NW Washington,  
D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough:

We write to request your support for the on-time construction and completion of a previously approved Substance Use Disorder (SUD) Residential Treatment Program center at the Togus VA Medical Center. Specifically, we ask that you place this project on the VA Secretary's Priority Projects list, and that the center receive required Fiscal Year (FY) 2022 construction funding and expedited priority for VA contracting. The timely construction and completion of this facility is crucial for the mental health and well-being of Maine veterans.

In August 2019, we wrote to your predecessor, Secretary Wilkie, about the need for a permanent residential treatment center at Togus to address the SUD and mental health needs of Maine's veterans. The VA currently sends Maine veterans who require overnight SUD or mental health care to VA medical centers that are often hundreds of miles from a veteran's home, such as those in Brockton, Massachusetts, and Stonington, Connecticut. For Maine veterans requiring overnight SUD or mental health care, the lack of an in-state treatment facility creates an almost impossible dilemma: seek care hundreds of miles away from family, friends, and other support networks or refuse treatment in order to avoid being sent away from their loved ones and communities.

Secretary Wilkie responded to our letter the following month, stating that the Veterans Health Administration's Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention (OMHSP) "recognizes the need for a residential program in the Northern Market and agrees with the concerns" we raised. The Secretary further noted that "OMHSP is supportive of ... plans for developing a Substance Use Disorder (SUD) program at the facility."

We wrote again in March 2020 to express the delegation's strong support for a Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) 1 request for out of cycle Strategic Capital Investment Planning (SCIP) funds to construct a 24-bed treatment center at Togus, emphasizing the "crucial, immediate need for a permanent treatment facility" in Maine due to increases in substance abuse by veterans, access to healthcare challenges in rural areas of our state, and the consistent, tragic connection between substance use disorder and corresponding mental health issues. In August

2020, we were pleased to learn that the VA had approved the SCIP request and would construct a 24-bed, state of the art SUD facility at Togus.

We are disappointed to discover that the timeline for construction and completion of the Togus treatment center has recently changed in response to new residential rehabilitation treatment program guidance from the VA. We further understand that funding for this project is not ensured for FY2023.

We respectfully request that the SUD Residential Rehabilitation Treatment Program facility at Togus be included on your Priority Projects list, and that it receive necessary FY2022 construction funding and expedited priority for VA contracting so that in-state SUD and mental health treatment can be provided to Maine veterans as soon as possible. This is consistent with congressional intent as expressed in the Fiscal Year 2021 appropriations bill joint-explanatory statement, which explicitly noted the need for this new facility at Togus.

The urgent need for this facility has only increased since our March 2020 letter to Secretary Wilkie. As we noted then, approximately 80-90% of Afghanistan and Iraq veterans who suffer from substance use disorder have also been diagnosed with related mental health issues.<sup>1</sup> Although COVID-19 has exacerbated mental health challenges nationwide, veterans suffering from stressors such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are often uniquely impacted by the social distancing and isolation challenges associated with the pandemic.<sup>2</sup> Recent research suggests these veterans are increasingly developing substance use disorder issues.<sup>3</sup> A consistent barrier to treatment has been a lack of meaningful access to care.<sup>4</sup>

The timely construction and completion of the planned SUD Residential Treatment Program center at Togus is essential to addressing the convergence of veteran SUD, mental health, and access to care challenges in Maine. Your urgent attention in this matter is greatly appreciated.

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<sup>1</sup> Teeters, J.B., C.L. Lancaster, D.G. Brown, S.E. Back. [“Substance use disorders in military veterans: prevalence and treatment challenges.”](#) *Substance Abuse and Rehabilitation*. August 30, 2017; 8:69-77.

<sup>2</sup> Wounded Warrior Project. [“Invisible Wounds and COVID-19: Heightened Risk for Wounded Warriors.”](#) December 2020. (Determining that previously wounded veterans “experiencing PTSD, depression, loneliness, or suicidal ideation are significantly more likely to suffer [a COVID-19-related quality of life] burden,” p. 2).

<sup>3</sup> Lipinski, Lynn. [“COVID-19 Pandemic Increasing Substance Use Among Veterans with PTSD.”](#) *University of Southern California Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work*. January 11, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Wounded Warrior Project, *supra.*, at 1 (“A common pandemic-related challenge [wounded veterans] reported was difficulty accessing care.”) and 3 (“These findings highlight the importance of connection opportunities and effective and accessible mental health services for veterans.”).

Thank you for your work on behalf of our country's veterans and for your service to our Nation.

Sincerely,



Jared F. Golden  
Member of Congress



Susan M. Collins  
United States Senator



Chellie Pingree  
Member of Congress



Angus S. King, Jr.  
United States Senator

Enclosures: Maine Congressional Delegation Letter to Secretary Wilkie (August 21, 2019)  
Secretary Wilkie Letter to Rep. Jared Golden, Senator Susan Collins, Rep. Chellie  
Pingree, Senator Angus King (September 10, 2019)  
ME Congressional Delegation Letter to Secretary Wilkie (March 5, 2020).

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

August 21, 2019

The Honorable Robert Wilkie  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Wilkie:

We write in strong support of VA Maine's request to VISN 1 for the establishment of a permanent Residential Rehabilitation Treatment Unit at the VA Maine Healthcare System with specific tracks for Substance Abuse Disorder and Serious Mental Illness.

Inadequate access to mental health care services has been a particular area of concern for Maine veterans. The Togus VA Medical Center (Togus) is the only VA medical center in the state, and currently lacks long-term treatment beds for veterans seeking mental health or substance abuse treatment. Maine veterans requiring long-term inpatient services are sent to other medical centers out of state, often at a considerable distance from their homes and families.

This lack of local mental health services presents an exceptionally difficult choice for Maine veterans who seek mental health and substance abuse treatment: either receive care far away from their family and support networks or forego evaluation and treatment out of concern for having to leave their communities.

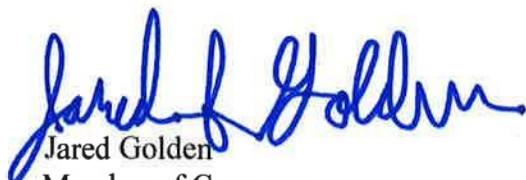
Information provided by the VA Maine Healthcare System demonstrates the need for a permanent, in-state mental health and substance abuse treatment center at Togus: Veterans requiring overnight mental health or substance abuse evaluation are sent to VA facilities hundreds of miles away in White River Junction, Vermont, Brockton, Massachusetts, or Stonington, Connecticut. Maine veterans face a substantial, ongoing need for mental health and substance abuse care. Between 2017 and 2018, the VA Maine Healthcare System provided over 1,000 days of inpatient bed care.

The lack of meaningful mental health and substance abuse services in Maine is not unique to the VA, as there is also a lack of private, long-term mental health services available for veterans in our state. Regardless, there is no substitute for Maine veterans being able to receive these critical services from the VA, as VA providers are better trained to help veterans overcome the unique challenges that can stem from military service in general and combat service in particular.

Togus urgently needs the ability to provide veterans with long-term care for mental health or substance abuse issues. This unacceptable situation for Maine veterans has continued for too long. Accordingly, we urge the Department, consistent with all applicable laws and regulations, to establish a Residential Rehabilitation Treatment Unit at Togus for veteran mental health and substance abuse care and treatment.

Thank you for your support for veterans in Maine and throughout our great nation. Should you have any questions about this request, please do not hesitate to contact us or have your staff contact Matthew Rich (Golden) at 202-225-6306 or Mike Wakefield (Collins) at 202-224-2523.

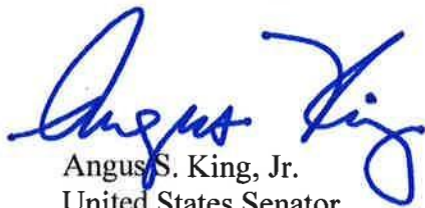
Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jared Golden".

Jared Golden  
Member of Congress

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Susan M. Collins".

Susan M. Collins  
United States Senator

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Angus King".

Angus S. King, Jr.  
United States Senator

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Chellie R".

Chellie Pingree  
Member of Congress



THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS  
WASHINGTON

SEP 10 2019

The Honorable Jared Golden  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman Golden:

Thank you for your August 21, 2019, co-signed letter to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) regarding the establishment of a permanent Residential Rehabilitation Treatment Unit at the VA Maine Healthcare System (HCS). I appreciate the opportunity to address your concerns.

The Veterans Health Administration's Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention (OMHSP) recognizes the need for a residential program in the Northern Market and agrees with the concerns you and your Congressional colleagues have raised. OMHSP is supportive of Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) 1 and the Togus VA Medical Center's (VAMC) plans for developing a Substance Use Disorder (SUD) program at the facility.

VA New England HCS and VA Maine HCS have been working on this issue and, with the assistance of OMHSP, have recently completed a clinical needs analysis, often called a market assessment, for the state of Maine. This market assessment examined current needs and used predictive analytics to help plan for the future treatment needs of Maine's Veterans. Consultations with Togus' Director of Mental Health, VISN 1's Chief Mental Health Officer, and the OMHSP Mental Health Residential Rehabilitation Treatment Programs Section have focused on the projected need for residential treatment in the Northern Market of VISN 1; the number of beds required to meet the expected need; and the specific types of services provided in an intensive SUD residential program. OMHSP, VA New England HCS, and Togus VAMC are working together to establish a timeline for standing up this important treatment program.

Should you have further questions, please have a member of your staff contact Ms. Michelle Myers, Congressional Relations Officer, at (202) 224-2815 or by email at [Michelle.Myers3@va.gov](mailto:Michelle.Myers3@va.gov). The cosigners of your letter have been sent similar responses.

Thank you for your continued support of our mission.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Robert L. Wilkie", is positioned above the printed name.

Robert L. Wilkie



**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

March 5, 2020

The Honorable Robert Wilkie  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary Wilkie:

Thank you for your September 10, 2019 response to our August 2019 delegation letter in support of a permanent Residential Rehabilitation Treatment Unit at the VA Maine Healthcare System. We wish to follow up on our earlier correspondence and express the Maine Congressional delegation's strong support for funding to construct a Substance Use Disorder (SUD) treatment center at the Togus VA Medical Center.

We understand that Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) 1 recently submitted a request for out of cycle Strategic Capital Investment Planning (SCIP) funds to construct a 24-bed facility at Togus based upon the results of the critical needs analysis/market assessment mentioned in your September 10<sup>th</sup> letter.

Such a facility is necessary because Maine veterans in need of substance use treatment and mental health care must currently choose between being sent hundreds of miles away from their homes to VA facilities offering these services (such as those in Brockton, MA, or Stonington, Connecticut), receiving treatment outside of VA away from other veterans and VA's trusted practitioners who know the unique needs of veterans, or foregoing treatment altogether in order to remain near home with their families and support networks.

We wish to emphasize the crucial, immediate need for a permanent treatment facility at Togus to address the critical situation of rural veteran substance use. As noted in a recent Government Accountability Report, substance use by veterans has increased significantly in recent years. Although veterans are more likely to live in rural areas than the general population, rural veterans often face obstacles in receiving healthcare services, including substance use treatment.”<sup>1</sup> The lack of meaningful access to substance use treatment for rural veterans is not unique to the VA, as there is also a lack of private substance use treatment services available for veterans in our state.

The establishment of a permanent Residential Treatment Center at Togus is also necessary to address the deleterious mental health issues associated with veteran substance use, particularly in rural areas where access to substance use and mental health treatment is limited. Almost

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<sup>1</sup> Government Accountability Office: Veterans Health Care: Services for Substance Use Disorders, and Efforts to Address Access Issues in Rural Areas 27 (December 2019).


460,000 rural veterans, for example, served in Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>2</sup> Approximately 80-90% of Afghanistan and Iraq veterans treated for substance use disorder have also been diagnosed with corresponding mental health issues.<sup>3</sup> The profound, often generationally-affecting toll of substance use and corresponding mental health issues for rural veterans and their families is one that each of our offices has seen in our efforts to assist Maine veterans and their loved ones with substance use issues. A permanent SUD treatment center at Togus is crucial towards addressing this crisis.

Thank you again for your support for veterans in Maine and throughout the country. Should you have any questions about this request, please do not hesitate to contact us or have your staff contact Matthew Rich (Rep. Golden) at 202-225-6306, Mike Wakefield (Senator Collins) at 202-224-2523, Todd Stein (Rep. Pingree) at 202-225-6116, or Jack Faherty (Senator King) at 202-244-5344.

Sincerely,

  
Jared B. Golden  
Member of Congress

  
Susan M. Collins  
United States Senator

  
Angus S. King, Jr.  
United States Senator

  
Chellie Pingree  
Member of Congress

cc: Dr. Richard A. Stone, M.D., Executive in Charge, Veterans Health Administration

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<sup>2</sup> Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Rural Health, Rural Veteran Demographics, available at: <https://www.ruralhealth.va.gov/aboutus/ruralvets.asp#atlas> (accessed March 2, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Teeters JB, Lancaster CL, Brown DG, Back SE. Substance use disorders in military veterans: prevalence and treatment challenges. *Subst Abuse Rehabil.* 2017;8:69–77. Published 2017 Aug 30. doi:10.2147/SAR.S116720.