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.

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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 [redacted] or [redacted].

Sincerely,

Jared Golden
Member of Congress

Susan M. Collins
United States Senator

Angus S. King, Jr.
United States Senator

Chellie Pingree
Member of Congress