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.[1] 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.[2] Recent research suggests these veterans are increasingly developing substance use disorder issues.[3] A consistent barrier to treatment has been a lack of meaningful access to care.[4]

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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[1] 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.

[2] 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).

[3] 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.

[4] 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).