Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

April 26, 2022

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 provide our strongest recommendation and to urge your support for Veterans Integrated Service Network 1's (VISN1) Phase II Strategic Capital Investment Planning (SCIP) request to expand the previously approved Residential Rehabilitation Treatment Program (RRTP) facility at the Togus VA Medical Center. If enacted, the Phase II SCIP proposal will expand the center to the 24-bed installation originally conceived when the project was approved in August 2020. A fully funded, 24-bed facility is vital to adequately address the scope of mental health and substance use disorder (SUD) challenges impacting Maine veterans and their families.

We have consistently advocated for a permanent, overnight RRTP facility at Togus for several years. We first wrote to your predecessor in August 2019 to highlight the need for a permanent Togus residential treatment center that would address the mental health and SUD needs of Maine's veterans. In a large, often highly rural state such as Maine, access to healthcare, and in particular mental healthcare, presents an ongoing challenge. Currently, the VA sends Maine veterans who require overnight mental health or SUD care to VA medical centers hundreds of miles from the state, such as Brockton, MA and Stonington, CT.

The VA acknowledged the need for a permanent residential treatment facility in Maine the following month, and in March 2020 we wrote again in support of VISN1's SCIP request for a 24-bed treatment center at Togus, highlighting the "crucial, immediate need for a permanent treatment facility" to address increasing substance abuse by Maine veterans, the access to healthcare challenges among the state's rural veterans, as well as the link between SUD and mental health issues. In August 2020, the VA approved plans for a RRTP facility at Togus.

The RRTP at Togus was approved and designed as a 24-bed facility to reflect the significant need for mental health and SUD treatment in Maine. Due to unforeseen design costs as well as statutory and agency limitations on total expenditures for VA Minor Construction Projects, however, the scope of the initial project had to be reduced and consequently previously approved funds are sufficient for only a 12- 14 bed facility.

The current Phase II SCIP request would provide the necessary funds to restore the original scope of the RRTP center and create a 24-bed installation. In addition to accommodating a larger number of veterans, once completed the facility will provide a host of features necessary for comprehensive mental health and SUD care, including family visitation areas, a kitchen and recreation area, as well as a secure women's unit.

A fully funded, 24-bed RRTP facility at Togus is essential to meaningfully address the concurrent mental

health and SUD crises and access to healthcare challenges affecting Maine veterans. As we have noted previously, there is a significant link between mental health challenges and SUD among veterans, particularly among veterans who served in Afghanistan and Iraq.[1] For Maine veterans afflicted by mental health or SUD crises, there is no current in-state treatment option. Consequently, Maine veterans, particularly those in rural parts of the state, must often make an agonizing choice of whether to seek assistance and be sent hundreds of miles from their loved ones, friends, and community, or forgo treatment to remain close to family and support networks. The VA's recent recommendations to the Asset and Infrastructure Review Commission for a permanent RRTP facility at Togus underscore this point, noting that "the closest VA point of care with RRTP services [is] approximately 150 minutes away," that "[T]here are limited high-quality alternatives [for care] in the community," and that the need for RRTP beds is expected to increase in the coming years.[2]

We respectfully request your strong support for VISN1's Phase II SCIP request to fully fund the Togus VA Medical Center's RRTP center as originally designed. A fully resourced, 24-bed RRTP facility at Togus is necessary to address the mental health and SUD care issues adversely impacting Maine veterans and provide them with the comprehensive healthcare they deserve after rendering faithful and honorable service to our nation.

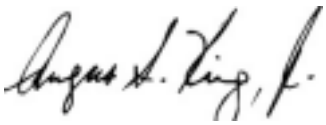
Thank you for your attention to this matter and for your service on behalf of our nation's veterans.

Sincerely,

Jared F. Golden
Member of Congress

Susan M. Collins
United States Senator

Chellie Pingree
Member of Congress



Angus S. King
United States Senator

[1] See 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] VA Recommendations to the Asset and Infrastructure Review Commission, VISN1 Market Recommendations 23 (March 2022).