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 10th 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."[1] 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

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

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460,000 rural veterans, for example, served in Afghanistan and Iraq.[2] Approximately 80-90% of Afghanistan and Iraq veterans treated for substance use disorder have also been diagnosed with corresponding mental health issues.[3] 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 [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

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

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[2] 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).

[3] 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.