Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

October 24, 2012

The Honorable Eric Shinseki
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Shinseki:

As Veterans Day approaches, veterans across the state of South Dakota are concerned about the future of health care provided to them at the VA Black Hills Health Care System (BHHCS). In Pine Ridge, veterans are worried they'll have to rely on the overburdened Indian Health Service or travel an additional 1.5 hours for care at a VA hospital when they are already facing financial and transportation-related challenges. Veterans who moved to Hot Springs specifically to live near the VA are worried that they will now have to travel for those services or rely on care at a private facility. Across the catchment area veterans are worried that the quality, personal, veteran-centered care that they've come to know and expect at the Hot Springs VA will be forgone in place of contracting out to private facilities.

While we appreciate the challenges the VA faces in providing access to care in rural America, and recognize that some realignment may be necessary, we strongly oppose the VA's current proposal as presented. We understand you are being briefed on the feedback and counterproposals to the VA's December 2011 proposal and will be making a final decision in the coming weeks. We would like to renew the request made in our October 2, 2012, letter that you meet with us in Hot Springs, SD, along with other relevant stakeholders before any action is taken. As you examine these issues, consider the lasting impact these changes would have on veterans and the community and carefully study the degree to which the VA's proposal is based on assumptions which have not been thoroughly vetted. From the beginning, we have raised concerns about the proposal's emphasis on relationships with the Indian Health Service, Fall River Health Services, the South Dakota State Veterans Home, and other private providers and questioned the degree to which these providers are interested in and capable of working with the VA. We have received only vague reassurances from the VA to our questions on this matter. When these partnerships are so central to the VA's proposal, the simple assertion that the VA is

having "ongoing conversations" with these parties is not enough to give us the confidence that this will be successfully implemented.

We appreciate your continued dedication to our nation's veterans and look forward to continuing to work with you to provide quality health care to veterans in the BHHCS.

Sincerely,

TIM JOHNSON
United States Senator

JOHN THUNE
United States Senator

KRISTI NOEM
Member of Congress