

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 15, 2018

The Honorable David J. Shulkin, MD
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary Shulkin:

We write to request an update of your review of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) footprint and transition to a quality and outcome-based system. When you met with the South Dakota Congressional delegation last May, you discussed shifting to a quality-based system that would maintain services at facilities with top patient outcomes, while relying on community care in instances where the VA is not adequately meeting veteran needs. Accordingly, you said you would review the previous administration's Record of Decision concerning the realignment of services within the VA Black Hills Health Care System and halt any associated reduction in services at the Hot Springs VA until you completed a national review of the VA's footprint and delivery of care. We would like to reiterate our support for the tremendous care provided by the Hot Springs VA and again express our concern that the VA's misguided intention to realign services will deny veterans the care they have selflessly earned, especially those in inpatient post-traumatic stress and addictive disorders services.

As we discussed, the VA Strategic Analytics for Improvement and Learning Value Model (SAIL) data first released by *USA Today* on December 7, 2016, indicated the Hot Springs and Fort Meade VAs were two of only 16 five-star facilities in the third quarter of 2016.¹ The Hot Springs VA was also one of 14 that was also rated a five-star facility in the fourth quarter of 2015. We believe that this stellar performance should have given the VA pause before signing the Record of Decision to significantly reduce the services there. Unfortunately, subsequent quality of care ratings downgraded the Hot Springs VA to a four-star facility on September 30, 2016, and to a two-star facility on September 30, 2017.² We are concerned that this precipitous drop was a direct result of the continued uncertainty surrounding the facility's future and subsequent hiring challenges, which have persisted at the hand of the VA.

In order to restore confidence within the veteran community and uphold our solemn commitment to their care, we ask that you support steps to remediate the decline in quality factors at the Hot Springs VA, as well as consider its designation as a Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Center of Excellence. The success stories of the Hot Springs domiciliary program speak for themselves, and we ask that you consider visiting the campus to see first-hand the environment of healing

¹ <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2016/12/07/internal-report-details-secret-quality-ratings-veterans/94811922/>

² https://www.va.gov/QUALITYOFCARE/measure-up/Strategic_Analytics_for_Improvement_and_Learning_SAIL.asp

fostered in Hot Springs. We believe a visit to Hot Springs would also prove informative as you contemplate the broader question of realignment.

We appreciate your continued engagement on this matter and look forward to continuing the discussion on how we can best provide for our veterans.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "John Thune".

JOHN THUNE
United States Senator

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "M. Michael Rounds".

M. MICHAEL ROUNDS
United States Senator

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Kristi Noem".

KRISTI NOEM
Member of Congress