

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

March 15, 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 concerning the adverse impact that the March 14, 2022, Veterans Affairs' (VA) recommendations to the Asset and Infrastructure Review (AIR) Commission would have on the VA Black Hills and VA Sioux Falls Health Care Systems. The AIR recommendations call for a realignment of the VA Black Hills Health Care System, transitioning the full-service VA hospitals in Hot Springs and Fort Meade into community-based outpatient clinics, and relocating many of those services to a new VA medical center in Rapid City. The VA medical center in Sioux Falls would lose its inpatient medical and surgical services, and the outpatient services site in Wagner would close.

The VA's recommendations to the AIR Commission should seek to expand and improve access to health care. Instead, the VA has issued proposals that would reduce access to health care and impose serious hardships on rural and tribal veterans. Removing services from the Hot Springs and Fort Meade facilities, and consolidating health care services in Rapid City and Sioux Falls, would substantially reduce high-quality care options for those veterans who have benefited from access to rural VA services in South Dakota.

While vital to rural South Dakota communities, the Hot Springs and Fort Meade VA hospitals serve more than just South Dakota. Our neighbors in Wyoming, Montana, Nebraska, and North Dakota have benefitted from the high-quality care and unique healing environment in these VA hospitals for years. Removing services from Hot Springs and Fort Meade would put accessible care out of reach for many veterans, regardless of whether a new VA medical center is established in Rapid City.

Just two years ago, then-VA Secretary Robert Wilkie announced that the Hot Springs VA would remain open and increase services to veterans, rescinding a 2017 record of decision to close the facility. You can imagine our surprise following the release of the AIR report to find that the VA is now recommending services be reduced at the Hot Springs VA. One of the reasons why the VA rescinded the earlier decision to close the Hot Springs VA is due to the first-class rehabilitation programs for veterans, including the residential rehabilitation treatment program that provides work therapy programs and recreational and retreat opportunities for veterans receiving treatment for PTSD and substance abuse. Abandoning these services would be a total reversal of the VA's previous commitment.

For nearly a decade, we fought tooth and nail to defend the Hot Springs VA and the surrounding communities. We stood side-by-side with veterans, health care professionals, and community leaders as we made our case to previous administrations about the significant benefits that these facilities provide to veterans throughout the multi-state area they serve. We can assure you that we will continue that fight to defend them and make our case to the AIR Commission that the VA's misguided recommendations to close and downsize several VA facilities in South Dakota are a mistake and should not be implemented.

Thank you for your continued attention to this important matter.

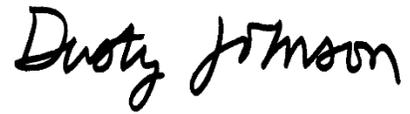
Sincerely,



JOHN THUNE
United States Senator



M. MICHAEL ROUNDS
United States Senator



DUSTY JOHNSON
Member of Congress