

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 20, 2020

The Honorable Robert Wilkie
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Wilkie:

We write to ask the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to take additional measures to ensure that our at-risk veterans, including those exposed to burn pits and other toxic substances, receive the care they need as our country confronts a significant increase in the demands on our health care system during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

Servicemembers who have been exposed to burn pits suffer from higher rates of asthma, emphysema, and rare lung disorders – making them particularly at risk for experiencing serious or potentially life-threatening symptoms should they contract coronavirus. The VA estimates that over 3.5 million veterans have been exposed to burn pits, and over 200,000 veterans and servicemembers have signed up for the Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry to date. Given the significant number of at-risk veterans, it is critical that the VA prioritizes efforts to ensure that these brave men and women are able to safely receive care during the current public health crisis.

Considering reports that VA representatives have estimated that that up to one in five veterans could require coronavirus-related care,¹ we call your attention to the VA's COVID-19 Response Plan. The Plan mentions veterans with service-connected respiratory issues, such as burn pit exposure, are among at-risk populations that may engage with the VA through the Department's Readjustment Counseling Services (RCS). According to the Plan, many veterans who access RCS do so at a local Vet Center; however, it also states that not all Vet Centers are telehealth-ready. In addition to this technology gap, we also have concerns about the safety and preparedness of RCS staff. It is important that staff have the necessary medical equipment and supplies, including masks, gloves, and sanitation supplies, to safely interact with and provide services to veterans visiting their facilities for telehealth appointments and other essential business.

We request that you provide information at your earliest convenience on how the VA is expanding telehealth capabilities across RCS facilities to provide veterans, including those with respiratory issues brought on by burn pit exposure, with greater access to care as well as what the VA is doing to provide all necessary medical and sanitation supplies to Vet Centers and other RCS access points to promote the safety of staff and the veterans they serve. Additionally, we

¹ American Homefront Project. (2020, March 26). The VA Is Screening For Coronavirus, But Not Everyone At The Agency Feels Prepared. Retrieved from <https://www.cpr.org/2020/03/26/the-va-is-screening-for-coronavirus-but-not-everyone-at-the-agency-feels-prepared/>

request that you communicate with veterans the resources that are available to them during the pandemic.

Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator



M. Michael Rounds
United States Senator