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United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

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The Honorable David J. Shulkin
Under Secretary for Health
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Under Secretary Shulkin,

Thank you for your letter on November 30, 2015, regarding my request for establishing a Vet Center in Grand Forks, North Dakota. I am writing to bring your attention to a key provision in the fiscal year (FY) 2016 Consolidated Appropriations Act and to express my continued concern for the underserved veteran population in the counties surrounding Grand Forks.

When I previously raised this issue in November, I mentioned the importance of adequately funding Readjustment Counseling Services so the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) can better serve veterans in all states, including rural veterans in North Dakota. Since that time, I worked with my colleagues to add \$2.3 billion for veterans' health care, services, and construction projects in FY 2016. The Consolidated Appropriations Act provides the VA with \$1.1 billion more than the President's request and includes \$258 million for Readjustment Counseling Services – which is \$15 million above the requested level. Most importantly, the conference report specifically directs these increased funds to be used for Vet Centers “to address the unmet mental health needs of veterans in rural and highly rural areas.”

North Dakota has the highest percentage of highly rural veterans in the nation. As you are well aware, the VA is statutorily required to provide all veterans enrolled in VA health care with access to timely and quality care, including those in rural and highly rural areas. The process you mentioned of combining the veteran population of just two adjacent counties to calculate whether an area meets the criterion for a new Vet Center not only seems arbitrary, but it unfairly favors non-rural states that might rely on just two cities in adjacent counties to meet this criterion within their small but dense city borders. The underserved veteran population in North Dakota is broadly dispersed, so taking into account only two adjacent counties is not a rational way to project actual readjustment counseling needs. In fact, if Cass County, which includes the city of Fargo, did not exist in my state, all of North Dakota would be ineligible to host a Vet Center under the criterion.

With this in mind, and because highly rural veterans are some of the most underserved veterans in the country, it only makes sense to include all adjacent counties, including

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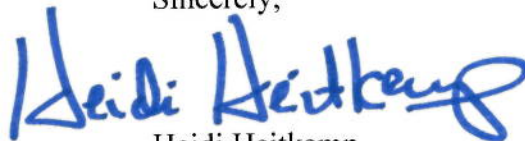
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those in a neighboring state in the case of communities that straddle a border, when considering the need for a Vet Center in rural states. Under this approach, Grand Forks exceeds the VA's criterion for establishing a Vet Center with a combined veteran population of 11,884 veterans. I have no doubt that North Dakota would experience demand from all adjacent counties for the services provided by a Vet Center if one were available. Additionally, because North Dakota is uniquely situated with remote counties along or near the Canadian border, three additional counties (i.e., Ramsey, Pembina, and Cavalier) would be served by this Vet Center, bringing the total to 13,775 veterans. With the increased funding provided in FY 2016 as well as the directive included in the conference report, it is apparent the VA will need to adjust its criterion for establishing a full Vet Center to ensure the additional Vet Centers meet the unmet health needs of veterans in rural and highly rural areas like North Dakota.

As you and your team work to fulfill this important objective, I request your consideration of a full Vet Center in Grand Forks and the broad appeal it will have to rural and highly rural veterans in the northeast region of my state. Not only would establishing a full Vet Center in Grand Forks align with Congressional intent for the increased funding provided to Readjustment Counseling Services, it would also have a meaningful and lasting impact on so many underserved veterans in North Dakota. And as a state with the country's highest percentage of highly rural veterans, North Dakota would truly be a fitting selection.

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss this matter in greater detail with you and appreciate your consideration of my request. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,



Heidi Heitkamp
United States Senate