

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 14, 2019

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

Dear Secretary Wilkie:

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me to discuss issues critical to veterans in New Mexico. I greatly appreciate your work on behalf of these veterans in New Mexico and across the country. To help me better serve my constituents, I am providing this letter seeking responses to the following subjects relating to some of the high-risk problems facing the Department of Veterans' Affairs.

Last week, the House passed the Burn Pit Registry Enhancement Act, which I have also introduced in the Senate on a bipartisan basis with Senator Dan Sullivan of Alaska. The bill requires that the VA update entries in the registry in the event that a veteran passes away. The bill also allows family members to report the information directly on behalf of a departed veteran. The bill improves upon the registry by reinforcing its original intent, helping us to gather more information so that veterans can receive the answers they deserve and the medical treatment they have earned.

- Will the VA support efforts to pass this bill in the Senate and recommend that the President sign it in to law?

The ultimate goal of the registry and the purpose of my work on burn pits is to establish a presumption for medical conditions that result from exposure. Veterans who have been injured in service should not have to jump through hoops. I believe that the evidence supports such a change, but I know the VA would like more evidence before establishing a presumption. It is therefore concerning that your budget recommended a \$17 million cut to medical research funded through the VA.

- Will you work with Congress to reverse that cut and fund the research necessary to establish a service presumption?

Last Congress, I succeeded in passing language in the Appropriations Bill to provide \$5 million to improve the registry according to the recommendations of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. And I also recommended language that requires the VA to collaborate with the Department of Defense to increase research into rare cancers that often result from exposure to burn pits.

- What is the VA doing to respond to these mandates? Also, do you recommend additional statutory changes to make sure the registry provides the greatest benefit to researchers and veterans?

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Although these are national issues, some are particularly acute in New Mexico. The complexity rating of Albuquerque's Raymond G. Murphy VA Medical Center was changed from a 1A to a 1B facility last year. This is a clear sign of decreasing capabilities for treating veterans within the VA. The loss of the medical center's neurosurgery department was the biggest contributor to the lower rating. This is one example of a broader problem where the VA has become less competitive in its ability to recruit specialists. Although, I am encouraged by new programs in New Mexico like the residencies for mental health practitioners, more can be done. Every year, I work to address the problem of retention and recruitment through the Appropriations Committee. There are still many vacancies for medical practitioners from nurses to general medicine to specialists.

- What can Congress do to help move the needle and give the VA the ability to educate and attract quality personnel?

The problem is not limited to medical staff. The VA in New Mexico also has difficulty hiring and retaining workers in support roles including sterile processing and custodial staff. A report from VA Office of Inspector General last October found that nearly 170 surgeries were delayed or canceled there during a two-and-a-half year period due to unavailable sterile instruments and equipment. Earlier this year, the Albuquerque VA Medical Center conducted a Stand Down lasting over 10 days in its operating rooms for the Sterile Processing Service to conduct necessary procedures.

- Does the VA have the authority to hire enough people to get this work done? Would it require changes to the VA's civil service hiring process to make sure it is done quickly?

Lastly, when the VA has gaps in its coverage, veterans now have more options to seek care in the community. Early this year, I sent a letter to you raising the issue that the VA has not consulted with Congress about access standards under the VA MISSION Act. As the proposed access standards are finalized, I ask that you pay special attention to situations in rural states like New Mexico.

Thank you again for taking the time to meet and discuss these issues, and I look forward to continued productive dialog with the VA under your leadership. I am encouraged by your demonstrated commitment to address many of the high-risk problems facing the Department of Veterans' Affairs, and I look forward to working with you to continue to make progress in ensuring veterans in New Mexico receive the benefits they have earned.

Sincerely,  
  
Tom Udall  
United States Senator