

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

April 14, 2022

Honorable Denis McDonough
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough,

We write to express our opposition to the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) recommendations to the Asset and Infrastructure Review (AIR) Commission, as prescribed in the VA Mission Act of 2018. We strongly believe that the VA's recommendations of closure of the four Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOCs) in northern New Mexico do not fulfill our promise to our veterans. It is imperative that you and the AIR Commission panel hear firsthand from New Mexicans how integral these clinics are to veterans living in rural and Tribal communities in the state.

We have specific concerns regarding the data and analysis utilized to support the assumption that local health care providers would be able to accommodate the increased need in the impacted communities. Going forward, we request that the VA consider the impact CBOC closures would have on local providers in New Mexico, the wait times for access to care for both Veterans and local patient populations, and the ongoing health workforce shortages experienced across New Mexico. As it currently stands, the VA's data did not reflect the impact of the pandemic on health care markets in New Mexico, nor did it provide a full understanding of the availability of community care in rural, Tribal, and predominately Hispanic areas. It is important the Commission has the most complete information possible, especially around the supply of health care, and what's available in our communities as they review and revise the recommendations.

Since the release of the recommendations on March 14th, we have heard from veterans across New Mexico, who have shared their concerns about the proposed closures. They told us about the VA's critical ability to deliver care in a way that recognizes the unique experiences of veterans and from providers attuned to their specific needs. They also described the difficulties of traveling further distances to receive care. To this end, we also request an update on how transportation costs were considered and if any deliberation was given to expanding the areas that qualify for Highly Rural Transportation Grants. Inadequate transportation, especially for older veterans, coupled with long distance travel and its associated costs in time and money would act as a barrier to care and would make health care services untenable for many veterans.

Finally, we request that the VA consider the unreliability and lack of broadband that would prevent telemedicine as a substitute for in-person visits in many of our communities. While innovations in telehealth helped bring medical expertise directly into veterans' homes, this is only possible with an infrastructure that supports this form of health care delivery. Without

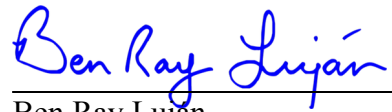
access to fixed broadband, affordable Internet service, and a focus on improving digital literacy, there are concerns about the VA's ability to provide equitable care to all veterans through telehealth services. Any final recommendations must take this into consideration.

It is our nation's solemn obligation to provide veteran's health care and other necessary services regardless of where they live. We look forward to further engagement and collaborating on how we can maintain the highest quality of care for the veterans living in New Mexico.

Sincerely,



Martin Heinrich
United States Senator



Ben Ray Lujan
United States Senator



Teresa Leger Fernández
Member of Congress