

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

January 28, 2019

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

The Honorable Patrick M. Shanahan
Acting Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

Secretary Wilkie and Acting Secretary Shanahan,

Military Sexual Trauma (MST) remains one of the most significant and concerning outcomes far too many veterans encounter as a result of their selfless service to our country. In addition to the trauma of the event itself, some of these men and women are further devastated by what happens after they report the event – when alleged perpetrators are held harmless while victims are held responsible and even reassigned, limiting their promotion potential. Due to the nature of military sexual trauma and the potential negative outcomes, they are significantly less likely to be reported, and treated, than other traumatic service-connected occurrences. As a result, we as a country still do not know the full scope of the problem. It is therefore incumbent upon us to provide as many avenues as possible for service members to seek help.

In 2014, in an effort to provide National Guard and Reserve service members with options for care, Congress passed a law that allowed Guard and Reserve service members who had experienced MST to seek care at VA facilities. Just recently, in 2017, we included provisions in Public Law 115-91 which clarified that access to VA facilities was intended not just for Guard and Reserve members who were on active duty or active duty training at the time of the incident, but also for service members who were on inactive duty training when they were subjected to sexual assault.

While attempting to gauge the extent to which the Departments of Defense (DoD) and Veterans Affairs (VA) have implemented this provision in law, we have been told a determination was made to limit this population's VA access only to the services provided by Vet Centers. While we understand the privacy and anonymity considerations of seeking care at Vet Centers as opposed to other VA facilities, the way this law is being implemented does not meet Congressional intent. Service members who have experienced MST and seek care should be able to access care through the VA health care system, not just the Vet Center program. That is what Congress intended, and that is what these men and women deserve. Anything less is unacceptable.

VA's own data demonstrates that in Fiscal Year 2018, fewer than 700 service members have sought MST- related counseling through VA. This number of service members seeking treatment across the country is certainly not substantial enough to stress VA's capacity to deliver such treatment. We therefore urge you to revisit this implementation plan soon. Service members who have already suffered because of MST deserve the access they were promised.

Sincerely,



JON TESTER
Ranking Member
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee



JACK REED
Ranking Member
Senate Armed Services Committee