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April 10, 2020

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

Dear Secretary Wilkie,

On March 27, the President signed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, commonly known as the CARES Act, into law. I fought hard to secure a number of important provisions for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in this massive stimulus package. Therefore, I need to know how VA is planning to implement these provisions for veterans who—by nature of their age and underlying health conditions—are at higher risk for developing complications from COVID-19, and deserve the best possible care during this pandemic. Keeping veterans safe starts by making sure that staff nationwide have access to the necessary resources to prevent COVID-19 exposure.

The CARES Act gives VA the authority to share personal protective equipment (PPE) with State Veterans Homes, which provide care to veterans in their final years. There are more veterans in State Veterans Homes than any other VA-funded long-term care site, and we cannot abandon these veterans simply because they are not receiving care directly from VA. Veterans in State Veterans Homes are especially at risk for dying of COVID-19, as evidenced by the outbreaks at the Life Care Center in Kirkland, Washington and the Soldiers' Home in Holyoke, Massachusetts. VA must be proactive in sharing life-saving PPE with State Veterans Homes. What is VA's plan for sharing PPE with State Veterans Homes as they care for our nation's veterans? When does VA plan to issue guidance to State Veterans Homes about VA's new authority to maintain payments to State Veterans Homes during COVID-19? The new authority allows VA to continue paying State Veterans Homes even if they do not meet certain capacity criteria due to the pandemic.

In addition to allowing VA to share its life-saving PPE to protect veterans and employees at State Veterans Homes, the bill also directs VA to provide PPE to home health workers, who are directly employed by VA and contracted employees. These workers go into the homes of elderly or disabled veterans to provide vital care. These workers are essential to the health of many vulnerable veterans, and ensuring their safety must be a top priority. PPE is also essential for home health workers to avoid unknowingly spreading the COVID-19 virus to veterans. My office has heard that these home health workers will not be provided the PPE necessary to do their jobs safely, going against the letter of the law. What is VA's plan to comply with the CARES Act and provide these employees and contractors with appropriate PPE so they can continue to care for veterans safely?

Some of our nation's most vulnerable veterans are homeless veterans, especially in an era of social distancing and "stay-at-home" orders. These veterans do not have a place to call home, and many live in collective living situations either on the street or in a shelter. I fought for provisions in the CARES Act that would give VA more flexibility in caring for homeless veterans and ensure that homeless shelters have the resources to operate during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Does VA plan to increase the per diem payment to Grant and Per Diem grant recipients, as authorized in the CARES Act? How is VA ensuring that grant recipients are encouraging veterans to social distance while still providing the supportive services that many homeless veterans require? Has VA begun implementing telehealth capabilities for the Housing and Urban Development – VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program?

VA must implement these new authorities, and others in the CARES Act, quickly and efficiently to protect veterans. As always, I stand ready to assist VA in providing needed authorities during this pandemic. Thank you for your steadfast commitment to our nation's veterans and I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jon Tester". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Jon Tester
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs