

United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 3, 2020

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

Dear Secretary Wilkie,

The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted racial and ethnic minority groups in the United States, yet the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has failed to share data on COVID-19 outcomes for minority veterans with Congress and the public.

According to the latest data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Black, Hispanic, and Native American communities have experienced higher COVID-19 case counts and/or death rates than white communities in many states across the country. While the data continues to evolve, these trends have been evident since early in the pandemic. Given minority veterans make up 23 percent all veterans, my office requested the following information from VA on June 15, 2020 regarding COVID-19 racial and ethnic disparities among veterans to compare non-veteran and veteran outcomes:

1. VA Office of Health Equity (OHE) information briefs including: COVID-19 National Racial Disparities, VISN 19 COVID-19 Racial Disparities, VA Response: Veterans of Color, and any maps or tables on COVID-19 prevalence and racial disparities at VA Montana.
2. Data on age, gender, race, ethnicity, and disability status disparities for COVID-19 testing, case counts, treatment, and care outcomes at VA nationwide. This in addition to any efforts VA has made to determine the causes of disparities in these categories and remedy them.
3. Data on COVID-19 disparities for 1) Native American veterans (American Indian/Alaska Native/Native Hawaiians) nationally, as compared to other racial/ethnic groups, and 2) the VA Montana health care system (e.g. by age, gender, race/ethnicity, and disability status).

As of August 3, I have yet to receive a response from VA on this request. However, the Department seems to have provided some of this data directly to the media. A July 23 article in [Connecting Vets](#) revealed that “Black and Hispanic veterans make up nearly half of all Department of Veterans Affairs patients who have tested positive for the coronavirus, though they only comprise about 23% of all VA patients.” This is a troubling disparity, and VA needs to share this data directly with Congress in order to properly exercise our oversight role and address any disparities through legislation, if needed. I am also alarmed VA failed to provide this data to Congress before our recent July 22 roundtable on Women and Minority Veterans, at which VA representatives were witnesses.

This comes after House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Chairman Takano sent you [a letter](#) on May 28, 2020, also requesting data on the impact of COVID-19 on minority veterans, and asking for VA to add this information the Department's daily COVID-19 update to Congress. This information has yet to be included in our daily congressional updates from VA.

Further, my office knows that VA already has the information on-hand for our first request, the VA OHE information briefs on COVID-19 racial disparities, as they were publicized on a June 4, 2020 VA webinar entitled "HSR&D's COVID-19 Response: Update on Efforts from Research & Operations Partners." However, these documents are only available to VA employees via the Department's SharePoint. It is extremely troubling that, more than 45 days later, VA refuses to share this information with the Committee.

VA also continues to assert to the Committee and to the media that there are no racial or ethnic disparities in COVID-19 death rates among veterans. This has been touted by VA leadership, and VA Press Secretary Christina Noel who stated that the mortality rate for veterans at VA infected with the virus "does not differ by race," in the July 23 Connecting Vets article, though she did not provide any data. While this may be the case, VA must make this data available to both Congress and the public so that its assertions on racial or ethnic disparities in COVID-19 veteran deaths can be verified.

On June 19, our Committee also requested a briefing from VA OHE leadership on its past efforts and successes, current budget and staffing, and the Office's plans for implementing its updated Action Plan and Operational Plan. More than a month later, VA has yet to provide any potential dates for this briefing.

VA has provided reliable, transparent information on veteran COVID-19 cases and deaths through its interactive website tool, daily Congressional updates, and near-weekly calls with VHA Executive-in-Charge Dr. Richard Stone. However, the Department's failure to provide its data and resources on COVID-19 disparities among veterans in a timely manner hampers our ability to monitor VA's response to this pandemic and any impacts on minority veterans, and respond accordingly.

We know that minority veterans continue to face challenges in accessing the care and benefits they deserve at VA. We need to be doing everything we can to ensure veterans of all backgrounds can access the COVID-19 testing, care, and resources they need to keep themselves and their families safe. I request your response to my June 15 request for information by August 14, 2020 and an OHE briefing for Committee staff and interested member offices to occur before August 28, 2020. I appreciate your attention to this important issue.

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