

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 16, 2020

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

Dear Secretary Wilkie,

We write to thank you for the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) work to support veterans during the COVID-19 pandemic and to encourage you to continue to increase veterans' access to quality telehealth services. As you know, high-quality health care for the brave men and women who have served our nation is a top priority and veterans need innovative solutions to address the unique challenges posed by COVID-19. We strongly urge you to prioritize continuous improvement to your telehealth offerings to meet the needs of veterans in New Hampshire and throughout the United States. Veterans in New Hampshire receive care through a number of VA facilities, including the Manchester and White River Junction VA Medical Centers, and a number of Community-Based Outpatient Clinics. We know that these facilities are working hard to transition their services to this new format, and we encourage you to continue monitoring their implementation of new policies and procedures.

Given the social distancing measures necessitated by this pandemic, telehealth programs at the VA are critical to ensuring that veterans receive the care that they need while staying safe and healthy inside their own homes. However, many of the veterans most at risk from COVID-19, including veterans with age- or health-related conditions, have not previously used telehealth services for their VA health care. As a result, these veterans face additional obstacles in navigating and accessing the care available to them. The VA must continue to provide up-to-date guidance and maximize the availability of mobile devices and broadband access to help all veterans, including rural veterans and those unfamiliar with telehealth, transition to telehealth appointments without interrupting their care.

Moreover, some veterans are also at increased risk for mental health crises during this incredibly stressful time of social distancing and self-quarantines. Virtual mental health appointments are an important part of combatting this isolation and ensuring the mental resilience of our nation's veterans. As you know, over the past month, the VA increased virtual mental health services by 70 percent, completing more than 34,000 virtual appointments through the VA Video Connect service in March, compared to 20,000 appointments in February. We are greatly encouraged by this success, and the VA needs to build on these efforts by providing new options for accessing care, closing gaps in coverage, and ensuring continuity and consistency in care to protect the lives of those who have served our country.

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) provided \$2.15 billion in funding to allow the VA to bolster its existing information technology networks to enhance its

capacity for telehealth visits for veterans. This funding aims to allow more veterans to receive care from the comfort and safety of their own home. The CARES Act also authorized the VA to enter into short-term agreements with telecommunications companies to provide broadband internet services for isolated and rural veterans, ensuring that veterans have sufficient bandwidth to access telehealth appointments.

In light of the new challenges facing the VA and the veterans it serves, and with the hope that we can work together to further support them, please provide information on the following:

1. How is the VA ensuring that the telehealth needs of veterans are being met as efficiently and effectively as possible, especially those ordinarily served at the Manchester and White River Junction VA Medical Centers?
2. How is the VA expanding access to adequate technology such as broadband internet access and electronic devices in order to reach all veterans, especially those in rural areas, including northern New Hampshire?
3. Is the VA effectively utilizing Community-Based Outpatient Clinics during this pandemic to ensure that veterans in remote areas have uninterrupted access to VA health care?
4. What services are available to veterans who need technical support to facilitate telehealth access?
5. What steps is the VA taking to bolster its cybersecurity efforts and combat scams targeting veterans? Are there awareness programs available for veterans accessing telehealth services?
6. Is the VA prioritizing immunocompromised, elderly, and other particularly vulnerable veterans in helping them access telehealth services?
7. Will eligible veterans not previously enrolled in the VA health system be able to begin accessing care virtually without going to a VA facility in person?
8. How is the VA using the funding provided in the CARES Act to expand existing telehealth efforts and bolster the agency's information technology networks?
9. Are there additional resources or authorities that the VA will need from Congress to ensure that veterans' healthcare will not be interrupted?

Again, thank you for your continued dedication and enormous efforts to rapidly shift your health care model to respond to the urgent and persistent healthcare needs of our nation's veterans. We are committed to continuing to work with you and the VA to facilitate these efforts and rapidly respond to the needs of all veterans.

Sincerely,



Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senator



Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator