

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 14, 2023

The Honorable Denis R. McDonough
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough:

We write to urge you to address the extremely concerning infrastructure failures at the Manchester Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical Center and other VA facilities in New Hampshire. The VA facility in Manchester continues to suffer from infrastructure-related problems that have significantly reduced its capacity to treat veterans. Last week, for example, water and heating concerns required patients in the Community Living Center to be relocated to other facilities and in-person appointments had to be cancelled. While we commend the staff at the facility for continuing to provide the best possible care to veterans, we urge you to prioritize improvements to this facility and a full-service VA hospital in New Hampshire. We also request that you brief us on your progress as soon as possible.

It is well documented that VA facilities across the country are struggling with upkeep of their aging facilities and infrastructure. While the Manchester VA Medical Center is 73 years old, according to recent studies, the average VA facility is 60 years old, five times older than the average building age of not-for-profit hospital systems in the United States.¹ The facilities are also in poor condition. One study estimated that VA would need two to three times its current expected funding levels to maintain its facilities and meet projected growth needs.² Aging infrastructure can reduce veterans' access to high quality healthcare, negatively affect the morale and effectiveness of VA's health care providers, and discourage some eligible veterans from seeking VA care.

The VA is also struggling with a growing maintenance backlog. The agency is attempting to balance daily upkeep with a need to completely modernize facilities. In 2021, the VA estimated that it would need \$22 billion to address poor and failing conditions at VA facilities.³ Some of the main challenges faced by the agency are that these older buildings are not set up to support new and changing technologies that are necessary to deliver the best care to patients.

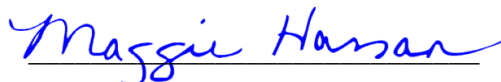
Dr. Shareef Elnahal, the Undersecretary of Veterans Affairs for Health, said in December 2022 that the VA would submit its updated infrastructure plan to Congress in the first half of calendar year 2023. We look forward to seeing this plan. Dr. Elnahal stated that the VA will focus more on new construction than on current infrastructure upkeep. It has long been our position that one of those needed construction projects should be a full-service VA hospital in New Hampshire.

Whether or not New Hampshire ultimately gets a full-service VA hospital, we strongly urge you to prioritize urgent maintenance of the Manchester VA Medical Center in the updated infrastructure plan. In 2017, a water pipe burst in the Manchester VA Medical Center closing the operating room for months and costing the VA millions of dollars to repair. On November 26, 2022, a different pipe burst in the facility that caused damage and flooding on the second, third, and fourth floors and forced the operating room to close for months again. Half of all appointments had to be cancelled or converted to telehealth. Finally, over the weekend of February 3, 2023, historic arctic temperatures were recorded in New Hampshire. In-person appointments at the Manchester VA Medical Center were cancelled due to water and heating concerns at the facility. Both the Community Living Center and long-term care unit had to be evacuated. In addition, the facility suffered another burst pipe in part due to the extreme weather. These are just some of the examples that highlight the ongoing problems and the critical need for modernized infrastructure at the current Manchester VA Medical Center, as well as the need for a full-service hospital in New Hampshire.

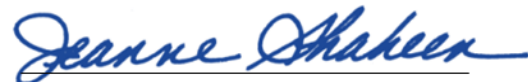
We respectfully request a joint meeting with you to discuss the specific problems at the Manchester VA Medical Center and talk about the much-needed improvements to the infrastructure and modernization of all of the VA facilities in New Hampshire.

Thank you for your time and willingness to meet and discuss these urgent matters.

Sincerely,



Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senator



Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator

¹ Jory Heckman, *VA 'Infrastructure 2.0' plan in works to expand network of health care facilities*, Federal News Network, Dec. 13, 2022, <https://federalnewsnetwork.com/veterans-affairs/2022/12/va-infrastructure-2-0-plan-in-works-to-expand-network-of-health-care-facilities/>

² Carrie M. Farmer and Rajeev Ramchand, *Infrastructure Investment for Veterans*, The RAND Blog, May 4, 2021, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2021/05/infrastructure-investment-for-veterans.html>

³ Nicole Ogrysko, *As VA plans to modernize aging facilities, it faces a daunting maintenance backlog*, Federal News Network, Mar. 9, 2021, <https://federalnewsnetwork.com/veterans-affairs/2021/03/as-va-plans-to-modernize-aging-facilities-it-faces-a-daunting-maintenance-backlog/>