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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 15, 2017

The Honorable David Shulkin
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, Northwest
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Shulkin,

We write today to inquire about the Tribal Department of Housing and Urban Development-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (Tribal HUD-VASH) demonstration program.

As you know, Native Americans serve in the military at a higher rate than any other group. However, they are also at greater risk of homelessness than their fellow veteran peers. That is why Congress authorized the Tribal HUD-VASH demonstration program during the FY2015 appropriations process.

Tribal HUD-VASH grants are intended to provide rental assistance, case management, and clinical and supportive services for Native American veterans who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. These supportive services may include substance abuse treatment, mental health care, job training, and other housing assistance. According to VA policy, participants should be provided with a case manager who serves as a direct link between VA support services and the Native American veteran recipients.

In January 2016, HUD Secretary Castro announced Tribal HUD-VASH grant awards to 26 different Indian tribes and tribally designated housing entities to provide housing vouchers to Native American veterans. The Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee and Senate Indian Affairs Committee have since heard concerns from tribes and partnering agencies regarding the lack of assistance in receiving timely direct support services and case management from the VA.

Some grant locations report case manager positions simply have not been filled or have been filled by a current VA employee asked to take over additional responsibility to coordinate services to the tribal grantees. Because the success of the Tribal HUD-VASH demonstration program is largely determined by the quality of direct support services provided by case managers, we are concerned the current level of support from VA is not allowing for the timely implementation of the program or achieving the goal of reducing Native American homelessness in tribal communities. An important trial program like this cannot be adequately assessed unless VA's full resources are put into the program.

Accordingly, we request that you provide our offices with information regarding how the initial application of the Tribal HUD-VASH grants are working at each of the 26 areas. We also request information regarding possible barriers to providing personnel, direct support services, case management, or other necessary resources to the tribes so they can carry out their housing plans under the demonstration program. If there are legislative barriers that you believe inhibit the Department from hiring appropriate personnel or effectively executing the Tribal HUD-VASH demonstration program, please share those as well.

This nation owes a huge debt of gratitude to Native American veterans and a responsibility to ensure they obtain the benefits afforded their peers. We look forward to your response on how we can ensure the success of the Tribal HUD-VASH program.

Sincerely,



Jon Tester
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs



Tom Udall
Vice Chairman
Senate Committee on Indian Affairs