

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

September 1, 2016

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

Dear Secretary McDonald,

We write today to strongly encourage the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to assess the feasibility and advisability of establishing a more robust Nurse Call Center, specifically targeting rural areas with a high number of veterans per capita and experiencing a workforce shortage of VA medical professionals. Such an initiative could help expedite the scheduling process for rural veterans and improve access to the care they have earned, and better leverage a VA medical workforce that is already stretched very thin.

As you may know, Public Law 114-133, the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2015, included report language directing VA to carry out such an effort “to furnish to veterans medical advice, appointment and cancellation services, and information on the availability of benefits from VA.” Yet to date, we have not seen any such steps from VA.

The Defense Department has already undertaken an initiative under its TRICARE Nurse Advice Line that has proven to be a success. This hotline has helped triage the care TRICARE beneficiaries receive. Many of these folks, who are often uncertain if they are experiencing a medical emergency and would otherwise visit an emergency room, call the nurse advice line and are given clinical recommendations for the type of care they should seek. As a result, emergency room visits are avoided and beneficiaries are better able to seek and receive the specific care they need. In fact, it is estimated that 73 percent of callers are redirected to a more appropriate and less costly level of care than they initially intended, and the return on investment for taxpayers is a savings of up to \$90 per call.

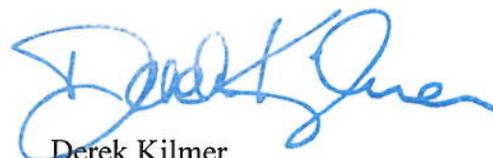
By consolidating the various medical advice lines already in operation, the VA could emulate many of the positive outcomes generated under the TRICARE Nurse Advice Line model, and help reduce out-of-pocket costs for many veterans related to emergency room care. A VA Nurse Advice Line, which could be deployed as a pilot program targeting rural veterans, could provide medical advice from Licensed Registered Nurses who would not have to yield a veteran’s diagnosis, but rather assess a veteran’s symptoms and triage the veteran to the clinically appropriate care venue. Such an Advice Line could also provide information to address basic questions for veterans regarding eligibility and availability of benefits, and help facilitate appointment-setting, rescheduling or cancellations through an Appointment Clerk.

We commend your continued commitment to improving access to exceptional services for rural veterans, and urge the VA to move forward on implementing a Nurse Advice line based on the TRICARE model. We appreciate your attention to this request, and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jon Tester", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jon Tester
United States Senator

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Derek Kilmer", with a large, stylized initial "D" and a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Derek Kilmer
Member of Congress