

United States Senate

January 11, 2016

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

Dear Secretary McDonald,

I appreciate your ongoing leadership of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and particularly your efforts to bring much-needed reform and accountability to the agency. Throughout the VA, we have seen a great deal of progress in your relatively short tenure, but restoring the faith of veterans and the public will certainly take more time, and there are a number of additional steps that need to be taken. Today, I write on behalf of two priorities – a Southwest Montana Veterans Home in Butte and a Vet Center in Helena – that would allow the VA to dramatically expand critical and highly-sought services to Montana veterans in need.

As you know, Congress recently approved an appropriations bill for Fiscal Year 2016 that will, among other things, provide an increase of nearly \$2.17 billion for the VA. As Vice Chairman of the Senate VA Appropriations Subcommittee, I fought hard for every penny in that bill on behalf of veterans. That included my strong opposition to a bill reported out of Committee that would have underfunded the VA by nearly \$1 billion, and my efforts on behalf of a broader budget deal that ultimately allowed us to restore those funds on the Senate floor. In doing so, I placed a particular emphasis on the need for additional investments to ensure the VA has what it needs to reach veterans who were currently underserved, such as those in rural areas seeking resident-centered long-term care and those seeking greater access to critical mental health services.

In addressing the need for resident-centered long-term care, I fought to ensure that VA's State Extended Care Facilities Program received a much-needed increase of \$40 million to address its growing list of high-priority projects in need of funding. I also worked to ensure that an additional \$20 million, appropriated to the Office of Rural Health, could be set aside specifically for projects dedicated toward new projects in rural areas.

The State of Montana's request for conditional funding to establish the Southwest Montana State Veterans Home in Butte is one such project. As I have communicated to you on multiple occasions, and as local advocates relayed directly to you during your trip to Montana last year, the services provided by State Extended Care Facilities are of particular importance to veterans in my State, and the establishment of such a facility in Butte would address the growing needs of veterans in that community and surrounding areas. I understand and appreciate the difficulties of working in the current fiscal climate but given the significant veterans' population per capita in Montana, along with the increasing needs of our Korean and Vietnam War-era veterans, the need for such a facility in southwest Montana is real and it is urgent. As such, I respectfully urge the VA to devote conditional funding to this critical project.

One of my other top priorities in the Fiscal Year 2016 VA Appropriations bill was increasing resources for Vet Centers, which have played a crucial role in the recovery and rehabilitation of our combat veterans and their families in Montana and across the country. I was pleased that the final bill provided an additional \$15 million so Vet Centers can ensure that even more veterans have access to the critical services they provide – whether it is readjustment and family counseling or mental health screening, or assistance with disability claims.

Unfortunately, as you know, the critical services provided by Vet Centers are not readily accessible to all of our veterans. In Montana, that is particularly the case for the veterans in Helena, who must travel up to two hours to access the closest Vet Center. As you heard directly from Montana veterans at our roundtable discussion in Helena last year, the opening of a new facility in that community would allow the VA to reach an under-served population of veterans, many of whom are veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan who struggle each and every day to overcome the hidden wounds of war and reintegrate more fully back into the families and their community.

Again, I appreciate your ongoing efforts to bring reform to the VA and to better ensure it is meeting the needs of our veterans. I write to you today to strongly reiterate my belief that these two additional investments – a Southwest Montana Veterans Home in Butte and a Vet Center in Helena – would go a long way toward restoring the faith of Montana veterans in the VA, and greatly expand access to the care and services they need. I appreciate your attention to each of these requests, and I am hopeful we can continue working together to see them into fruition in the coming months.

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