

United States Senate

October 5, 2011

The Honorable Eric Shinseki
Secretary
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Mr. Secretary:

As you begin the work of developing the Department of Veterans Affairs' Fiscal Year 2013 budget request, I write to urge you to provide adequate funding for Veterans Centers and the State Extended Care Facilities grant program. The service and care provided by these VA facilities are of particular importance to the State of Montana and its veterans.

In Montana, Veterans Centers have played a crucial role in the recovery and rehabilitation of our combat veterans and their families. In doing so, they have provided services unavailable at other VA Health Care facilities--such as readjustment and family counseling, mental health screening, employment assessment, outreach and education, assistance with disability claims, and many other services. These recovery programs can give veterans the skills and opportunities they need to find good paying jobs. According to VA statistics, in 2010, nearly 200,000 veterans and their families, including 126,284 veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, accessed these services at Veterans Centers across the United States. Nearly 40 percent of these veterans did not receive services at any other VA Health Care facility.

But the critical services provided by Veterans Centers are not readily accessible to all of our veterans. That the case for veterans residing in Helena, Montana. Though this community is home to the VA Medical Center at Fort Harrison, area veterans must travel up to two hours to access the closest Veterans Center. With over 7,000 veterans living in the Helena area and an ever increasing amount of new veterans returning home from war, local access to these services is critical. However, Montana's Veterans Centers are already operating at full capacity. The opening of a new facility would allow them to better meet the needs of the veterans they serve. Therefore, I urge you to request sufficient funding to ensure that our Veterans Centers can continue providing quality services to veterans and to allow the VA to expand these services to additional communities in need, such as Helena.

I also urge you to include sufficient funding in your upcoming budget to continue the VA's successful State Extended Care Facilities grant program. These facilities have consistently provided accommodations for veterans across the country who seek a supportive living environment and the dignity of resident-centered long-term care from highly trained providers. As we discussed during your recent visit to Montana, the State of Montana has submitted an application to construct such a facility in Butte. Without continued funding for the State

Extended Care Facilities grant program, veterans facilities, like the one requested by the State of Montana, would not be possible.

I applaud the VA for placing a priority on the health care needs of our veterans and I am hopeful that you will give due consideration to establishing a Veterans Center in Helena, Montana and continue to fund the State Extended Care Facilities grant program. It would provide a critical service to a veterans' community desperately in need. Through service to our nation, these men and women have earned access to these services as they transition home from war. On their behalf, I look forward to working with you and I appreciate your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

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

Jon Tester