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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 19, 2017

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

Dear Secretary Shulkin,

I write today to bring to your attention the need for significant changes to the VA's Beneficiary Travel Program in Montana. I continue to hear from veterans in my state about a growing backlog of reimbursement payments through the program, as well as frustration from them about the program being administered in a way that makes it unnecessarily difficult for veterans to file and keep track of their claims.

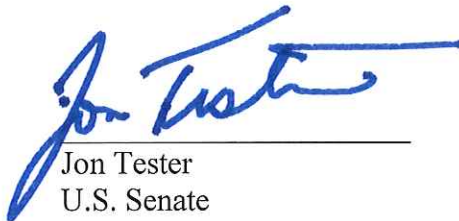
One of the primary reasons for the backlog of travel pay claims is the President's federal hiring freeze. The Fort Harrison Regional Benefit Office currently has one full time employee processing travel claims where previously there were two. The one full time employee was hired before the federal hiring freeze took effect and the second position remains vacant due to the hiring freeze. As a result, there are currently over 8,000 claims in backlog with the oldest being six weeks old. In a highly rural state like Montana, veterans depend on the Beneficiary Travel program to reimburse them for the costs of transporting themselves great distances in order to receive care from VA facilities or providers in the community. A six week delay in processing claims for reimbursement is an excessive financial burden for these veterans, many of whom make multiple travel claims per month and simply can't otherwise afford the travel costs. Moving forward, I request that you do what is necessary to fill this critical vacancy at Fort Harrison, in order to expedite the backlog and to better handle the volume of travel claims in Montana, which included more than 43,000 claims for Fiscal Year 2016.

I have also been made aware of administrative difficulties that veterans are experiencing with filing reimbursement claims. Many Montana veterans' difficulties are with the travel pay kiosks. Veterans have reported an inability to receive receipts when filing a claim with the kiosks, which is a serious problem because without a receipt, they often find that Fort Harrison has no record of their claim. This problem is made worse by the kiosks themselves, which do not keep data on travel claims for longer than 30 days. Additionally there is no receipt mechanism whatsoever for claims made at the travel office in person. This is inexcusable, and I'm sure you

would agree that no veteran should leave a VA facility without proof of the claim they have filed. Therefore, I urge you to better ensure that VA staff is trained and equipped to ensure the kiosks in their facilities are fully capable of producing receipts, that the kiosks can provide electronic receipts via email, that the kiosks be modified to store more than 30 days of claims data, and to develop protocols for VA Travel Offices to provide receipt of claims for those veterans filing in person.

Due to the rural nature of Montana, many Montana veterans file multiple claims for mileage reimbursement, but when those claims are made payable to the veterans' bank account, there is simply no way to distinguish which outstanding claim has been paid. This causes particular difficulties when there is a backlog, as veterans only have a 30 day window from the day of the appointment to file a claim and correct any issues with the claim before it is closed out. The current backlog is more than six weeks, which effectively eliminates a veterans' opportunity to correct and file lost or mistaken claims. I am requesting that VA develop a means of designating reimbursements by date to their original claim in order to help veterans keep track of claims that have been adjudicated.

Thank you for your attention to this matter and your work on behalf of our nation's veterans. I look forward to working with you to strengthen this critical program. Sincerely,



Jon Tester
U.S. Senate