

United States Senate

November 10, 2015

Deputy Inspector General Linda Halliday
Department of Veterans Affairs
Office of Inspector General
801 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Mrs. Halliday,

I write regarding the consult process at VA Montana. As I have previously discussed with representatives from the Office of Inspectors General (OIG), this issue is of great concern to me as it dramatically impacts the provision of care to the veterans I represent.

As you already know, late this summer, my office received an anonymous letter from VA Montana employees alleging that gross mismanagement at Fort Harrison contributed to a backlog of open consults as large as 50,000 and dating back as far as 2012. Upon receipt of the letter, I directed my staff to engage the VA at the local, VISN and national levels to determine the validity of the allegations. I also directed my staff to bring these allegations to the attention of the OIG.

While I believe that VA officials are taking these allegations seriously, Montana veterans simply need more answers. I am aware of ongoing efforts to address the issue and reform the consult process, but we need to know exactly what the VA is doing to resolve the open consults issue to ensure care for Montana veterans is not being denied or delayed. According to recent numbers shared by the OIG, the number of open consults at VA Montana is roughly half of the total open consults for our entire VISN – making it clear that there is something fundamentally wrong with the consult process at VA Montana. Above all, it is imperative that action be taken to get to the heart of this matter so the VA is better able to connect veterans with the care they have earned and deserve.

Therefore, moving forward, I formally request that OIG investigate the status of the consult process at VA Montana, including:

- The current number of open consults;
- How the current number of open consults compares with the number of open consults in other systems with similar demographics;
- The primary drivers for the number of open consults;
- How the current number of open consults is impacting the delivery of care for veterans;
- The extent to which there is a national and regional presence addressing the open consult backlog at VA Montana; and
- Recommendations for how VA Montana can address its backlog of open consults and implement a more efficient process moving forward.

Additionally, given that my office was first made aware of these issues through an anonymous letter and subsequent private conversations with VA employees who are operating out of fear of reprisal, I urge your investigation to include the following information:

- The extent to which there is an internal feedback mechanism at VA Montana through which employees can alert superiors of issues or processes that demand urgent action or reform without fear of reprisal; and
- Any instances in which employees working on the consult process at VA Montana have experienced reprisal or been subject to corrective action following the disclosure of concerns about the open consult backlog.

I appreciate your commitment to serve on behalf of veterans, and would like to be as helpful as possible on this matter moving forward.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jon Tester". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Jon Tester