

# United States Senate

August 24, 2018

The Honorable Robert Wilkie  
Secretary  
United States Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Wilkie:

I am writing to share my concern with recent reports that the Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) DC VA Medical Center (VAMC) continues to experience challenges in its efforts to provide safe and effective care for our veterans in the southern Maryland, northern Virginia and DC areas. There are nearly 380,000 veterans who call Maryland home, and many are utilizing the DC VAMC or the Community Based Outpatient Clinics for their healthcare needs. I urge you to work expeditiously to put in place a leadership team that can restore confidence in the center and provide necessary resources to bring the facilities into good repair.

Over the past several years, a number of troubling reports have come from DC VAMC, including logistic issues – surgical implements and sterilization – that have caused procedures to be canceled and a host of infection issues for the veterans. I have been in contact with your predecessors to ensure that veterans at DC VAMC receive the care to which they are entitled. While there has been progress in some areas, I have been frustrated by the lack of permanent leadership and continued reports of staff stretched thin and forced to take extraordinary measures to provide patient care.

First and foremost, DC VAMC must have a strong leader who earns the confidence of the rank-and-file staff who have worked under difficult conditions to meet the needs of their patients. As you are aware, the DC VAMC has gone through three directors (one fired and two acting) in the last 17 months. Detailees are filling a number of key positions. There have also been troubling reports of turbulence in the Medical Center's Police leadership. I also understand that it will take three to four months for the HR team to be in the position to fill about 600 vacancies. Stable leadership that emphasizes a culture of care for employees and patients is long overdue.

Additionally, DC VAMC continues to struggle with deficiencies in the facilities. Following the recent reports of HVAC issues that resulted in losses of blood and vaccinations in the hundreds of thousands of dollars and continuing issues with sterile surgical supplies, members of my staff participated in a briefing and tour of the DC VAMC.

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According to that briefing, the Medical Center's HVAC system is over 18 years old and there are no funds to grant a contract to replace the system. The Medical Center is currently utilizing portable units to cool patient rooms and waiting areas. More importantly, this still appears to leave the critical blood and vaccination storage areas vulnerable to the next failure of an antiquated system.

My staff was briefed on Sterile Processing Services as well. The solution implemented in April 2017 had been to attempt to have two sterile trays ready for each procedure. The leadership briefed on August 9<sup>th</sup> that the duplicate tray process is no longer the rule, but is now the exception, and the number of procedures scheduled has been reduced. The leadership reported that the SPS suite under renovation will now be ready to serve the patients in spring 2019.

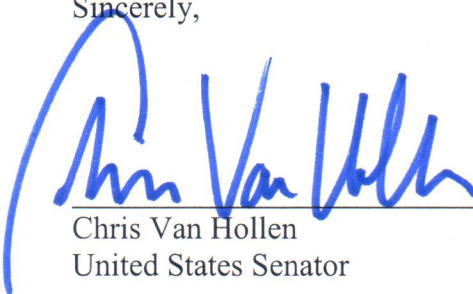
There have also been recent news reports, citing both employees and patients, that there are concerns that the roof might not be able to support the current HVAC unit, let alone a replacement.

Given the ongoing challenges and the urgency of the present situation at DC VAMC, I respectfully request answers to the following questions by September 7, 2018:

- When is a new, permanent hospital director expected to be named?
- What is the plan to fill the vacancies with permanent staffing?
- Will the VA provide funding and contract support to address the critical deficiencies of the HVAC system and prevent future supply losses?
- Can you provide additional information on the delays in fixing the Sterile Processing Services? What is the impact of reduced procedures on patients and their treatment plans?
- Is the roof structurally sound? What is the plan to expedite repairs to safeguard patients and employees?

I appreciate your attention to the conditions at DC VAMC that constitute a barrier to quality health care for our veterans. I look forward to working closely with you on our shared goal of ensuring our veterans receive the best health care and support possible. Thank you for your time and consideration of this matter.

Sincerely,



Chris Van Hollen  
United States Senator