

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

March 19, 2019

The Honorable Robert Wilkie
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary Wilkie,

In response to the Department Veterans Affairs' (VA) release of proposed access standards for the new Veterans Community Care Program (VCCP), as authorized by the VA Mission Act of 2018, we are writing to express our ardent support for the VA as a unique, primary healthcare provider. We are concerned that the proposed broadening of access eligibility standards could result in resources being diverted from direct VA services to community providers, which could result in less tailored care at a higher cost. Veterans have earned—and expect—the highest quality of care, provided by medical professionals who understand their unique conditions and circumstances, and taxpayers expect the VA to act as responsible stewards of its limited fiscal resources.

A rural state like Maine requires a careful balance between providing VA facilities and services with the resources it needs to continue to deliver the highest standard of care to our veterans, while also providing easy to use community care options that improve timeliness and accessibility for veterans who may live far from VA facilities. As we mentioned, we are concerned that the proposed broadening of access standards could result in the diversion of resources from direct VA care, to community providers. Maine Veterans have consistently told us how much they appreciate the high quality care they receive at Togus VAMC and other VA facilities in the State. The hallmark of VA healthcare is an exceptionally well-integrated medical system that encourages providers attuned to veterans to think holistically about their care in a way that cannot be replicated in the private sector.

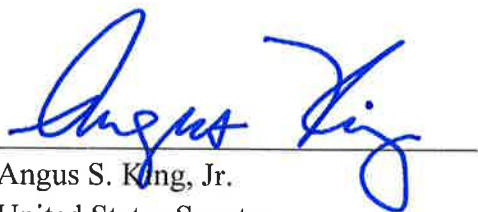
We request the following information:

- We believe that the VA should remain the primary provider of care, and the VCCP should be used to fill gaps in coverage areas. What data did the VA use to calculate the new access standards?
 - For the State of Maine, please provide data on the impact of access standard requirements. How many veterans were eligible for community-provider care in FY18, and how many does the VA project will now be eligible under the new standards?

- Recalling the demand forecasting issues that necessitated \$2.1 billion in Congressionally approved emergency appropriations in 2017 due to higher-than-expected volume use of community providers under the Choice program, how have you calculated expected demand for VCCP utilization, especially given the expanded access standards?
- How will the VA ensure that community providers who participate in the VCCP have the training necessary to meet the unique needs of veterans?

We urge the VA to continue its refinement of the new VCCP and its eligibility requirements in a transparent manner with consistent consultation with Veterans Service Organizations and Congress. Furthermore, we hope that the VA's first priority will remain maintaining robust resources for direct VA care and services, so that Veterans can continue to receive the high standard of care they earned.

Sincerely,



Angus S. King, Jr.
United States Senator



Chellie Pingree
Member of Congress