

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

December 4, 2023

Secretary Denis McDonough
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, D.C. 20571

Dear Secretary McDonough,

We are writing to inquire about the status of the Department of Veterans Affairs' NEXTGEN initiative to ensure Wi-Fi at all Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs) in Maine. As you may know, none of Maine's eight CBOCs have public Wi-Fi. Calais and Lincoln have no employee Wi-Fi whatsoever; and Caribou, Portland, Bangor, and Lewiston have limited Wi-Fi for staff. It is clear that Wi-Fi services in all CBOCs will improve staff efficacy and patient experience, medication management, and the ability to utilize a network via laptop to support the PACT model of care, moving from room to room to the patient.

Technology plays a critical role in providing healthcare in Maine, especially given the remoteness of many areas. The need for guest Wi-Fi impacts the veteran experience in VA Maine by limiting the ability to self-check in and do travel benefit forms via the "My HealtheVet" portal. Internal Wi-Fi would increase time spent with patients and external Wi-Fi would decrease wait times for veterans checking in via their cell phones. Furthermore, access to the internet can be a form of relief for patients and visitors who are in a facility for multiple appointments.

Historically, the VA has utilized a Kiosk system for veterans to check in for appointments, update personal information, and provide insurance information and travel benefit claims. In 2021, the VA announced a new check-in platform, thus retiring the Kiosk system altogether. This new platform requires self-check-in with smartphones, which naturally require Wi-Fi service for veterans with limited or no data plans on their phones, putting them at a disadvantage and increasing in-person check-ins.

With the advent of telehealth in 2003 and all the opportunities that virtual appointments provide, it would be beneficial to have the guest Wi-Fi available for these vulnerable patients who may have a variety of limitations that preclude a face-to-face visit while in the clinic. For example, a COVID-19 exposure, symptoms requiring social distancing, or the urgent need to video visit with a provider that may be remote to the patient site. All of these healthcare scenarios can vastly be improved with the availability of a guest network.

Moreover, per VHA notice 2021-16, all vaccines and medications in pharmaceutical grade require constant temperature monitoring for medication refrigerators and freezers to meet the US Department of Health and Human Services Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommendations. The use of the CenTrak monitoring system requires a Wi-Fi system in place

to record and monitor the temperature and variances, forcing the Maine VA to balance taking on a certain level of risk with medication and vaccine storage in our rural CBOCs.


In 2021, this led to VA Maine incurring two significant losses: Caribou's CBOC saw \$9,500 in lost medications due to a refrigerator malfunction without timely notification to staff/RN manager; Houlton's CBOC saw \$4,370 in lost medications due to a refrigerator malfunction without timely notification to staff/RN manager. This is unnecessary and unacceptable, and we request that the VA prioritize Maine's rural CBOCs in their national rollout.

It would be extremely helpful to understand the NEXTGEN implementation timeline better as it relates to Wi-Fi, specifically for Maine. Therefore, we respectfully request that you respond to the following questions:

1. When will each Maine CBOC get Wi-Fi?
2. What is the national timeline for NEXTGEN implementation?
3. How does the implementation of NEXTGEN Wi-Fi in Maine compare to implementation in other states?
4. What challenges have you identified to improve the availability of Wi-Fi across all CBOCs, and how are you addressing them?
5. How can Congress help ensure a swift rollout of NEXTGEN?


We look forward to receiving your response addressing this issue. Thank you for your consideration and continued service to our veterans.

Sincerely,


ANGUS S. KING, JR.
United States Senator


SUSAN M. COLLINS
United States Senator


CHELLIE M. PINGREE
United States
Representative


JARED F. GOLDEN
United States
Representative