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United States Senate

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November 21, 2014

The Honorable Robert A. McDonald  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue NW  
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary McDonald:

I write to convey concerns that I've heard from veterans in rural Colorado about the implementation of the new Veterans Choice Program.

As you know, Congress passed the Veterans Choice and Accountability Act of 2014 in an effort to improve access to veterans' health care and to reduce wait times. As part of that effort, the new law authorized the VA to create a Veterans Choice Program. The program allows veterans to seek care at local non-VA health and behavioral health facilities if they live more than 40 miles from the nearest VA facility or if they have to endure unreasonably long wait times. The law also allows the VA to make exceptions to the 40 mile requirement when veterans face geographic challenges, such as mountains, on the route from their home to a VA medical center.

The authorization for the program was intended to be broad, giving the VA the tools it needs to authorize care by non-VA facilities when care at the VA could not adequately accommodate veterans. For instance, the law's conference report states, "[t]he Conferees do not intend the 40-mile eligibility criteria included in this section to preclude veterans who live closer than 40 miles from a VA facility from accessing care from non-VA providers, particularly if the VA facility the veteran resides near provides limited services."

Since the new law was passed, my office has heard from veterans across Colorado who are excited about the Veterans Choice Program because of its promise to provide them closer and more efficient access to the health and behavioral health care they earned while in service.

However, since the VA started implementing the Veterans Choice Program in Colorado my office has started to hear a number of concerns from veterans. Specifically, veterans do not have a clear understanding of whether they qualify for the program and how to use the program effectively. As you know, Veteran Choice Cards have been sent out to veterans across the country. My office has heard from several veterans who have received their Veterans Choice Card but do not know where or how to use it.

In addition, veterans in rural areas are being told they were ineligible for non-VA care despite meeting the criteria set out in the law. My office has heard from veterans who have been told

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they are disqualified from receiving non-VA care through the Veterans Choice Program because under a straight-line distance they living only 39 miles from the nearest VA facility. However, because of mountains, the distance those veterans have to travel is more than 50 miles. This is exactly the set of circumstances meant to be covered under the geographical exemption Congress outlined in the legislation.

Finally, veterans are receiving incorrect information about the authorized providers in their areas. My office has heard from individuals who called the Veterans Choice hotline to obtain a list of possible providers, only to be given incomplete and incorrect information. As you can understand, this has caused greater confusion and mistrust in the new system.

It is my hope that the VA can address these issues as expeditiously as possible.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Michael F. Bennet  
U.S. Senator