

KYRSTEN SINEMA
ARIZONA

317 HART BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20510
(202) 224-4521

3333 E. CAMELBACK RD, SUITE 200
PHOENIX, AZ 85018
(602) 598-7327

20 E. OCHOA ST
TUCSON, AZ 85701
(520) 639-7080

<http://sinema.senate.gov>

United States Senate

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VETERANS' AFFAIRS

SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING

July 24, 2020

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

Dear Secretary Wilkie:

We write today to urge the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to organize a coordinated national strategy to support homeless veterans during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to guide efforts at the local level. At the June 3 Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee hearing, *Review of the FY 2021 Budget and FY 2022 Advance Appropriations Request and Oversight of the CARES Act Supplemental Appropriations for the Department of Veterans Affairs*, you outlined the programs that the VA provides to support the homeless veteran community. It remains unclear, however, how the VA is working with its community partners to ensure a coordinated, collaborative response.

Through the CARES Act, the VA has been able to increase the budget of the Supportive Services for Veteran Families and Grant Per Diem programs to provide additional relief to the homeless veteran population. The VA has also been on the ground in certain areas to provide support. However, the VA has yet to present a coordinated national plan that works with community partners to emphasize infection control and prevention, comprehensive testing of the homeless veteran community, proactive care for veterans who have tested positive for COVID-19, and the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) and access to testing and training resources for staff as needed.

Many efforts to support this community have been led at the local level. Unfortunately, national efforts remain disjointed and have been left largely to community organizations to coordinate and execute. Currently, the primary guidance these organizations have is the *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Interim Guidance on Unsheltered Homelessness and Coronavirus Disease 2019 for Homeless Service Providers and Local Officials*, which, while providing important guidance, is not a national strategy. Community organizations have expressed frustration at the lack of collaboration and worry for the health and safety of their own employees as they are left to transport and care for veterans testing positive for COVID-19. These organizations have expressed concern that their staff, who are not trained clinicians, are left to care for homeless veterans who have either not been tested or have tested positive and

have no other support system beyond these organizations. The presence of the VA as a central coordinating body and a health care entity would greatly benefit these partners.

The VA should be leading the coordination efforts hand in hand with community partners through the VA's programs for homeless veterans. We urge the VA to help direct these efforts through the creation of a national strategy. We recognize that each locality is different and will need flexibility to adjust guidance to specific local needs.

We also ask that you provide an answer to the following questions:

1. Why has the VA not yet created a national strategy to support the homeless veteran community during the response to the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What obstacles are preventing the VA from implementing a national COVID-19 testing strategy for the homeless veteran population?
3. Are there additional authorities that the VA needs to implement a national strategy that includes infection control and prevention, comprehensive testing of the homeless veteran community, proactive care for those veterans who have tested positive for COVID-19, and outfitting staff with proper PPE and access to testing as needed?

Homeless veterans face some of the greatest risks for COVID-19 complications and live in conditions that make them much more likely to contract the virus. We acknowledge the work that the VA has done thus far to support this population, but more must be done. We are committed to working with you to ensure that the VA is coordinating with its partners to get homeless veterans the support and care they need to keep them safe during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sincerely,



Kyrsten Sinema
United States Senator



Joni K. Ernst
United States Senator



Jon Tester
United States Senator



Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator



Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator



Dianne Feinstein
United States Senator



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator

/s/ Tim Kaine
Tim Kaine
United States Senator