

**United States Senate**  
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 19, 2020

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro  
Comptroller General  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro;

There are currently nearly five million veterans living in rural communities. Of these, about 60 percent rely on the Veterans Administration's (VA) Veterans Health Administration (VHA) for their health care. This is a significantly higher percentage compared to veterans living in urban areas. In Arizona and Alaska, nearly 15 percent and 30 percent of the veteran population, respectively, live in rural communities. Veterans living in rural communities face additional challenges in accessing healthcare and other support services because of longer travel times, limited transportation options, lack of broadband access, and other infrastructure challenges.

In 2006, Congress established VHA's Office of Rural Health (ORH). ORH has a number of responsibilities, including to conduct, coordinate, promote and disseminate research on issues that affect veterans who reside in rural communities. Additionally, ORH has a number of other responsibilities, including to develop, refine and promulgate policies, best practices, lessons learned, and innovative and successful programs affecting rural veterans.

ORH carries out its responsibilities working with its five Veterans Rural Health Resource Centers, as well as through other collaborative partnerships with academia, state and local governments, private industry, and non-profit organizations.

We want to ensure that ORH's responsibilities help to inform and improve the care that veterans living in rural communities receive. This is particularly important given the COVID-19 pandemic where care concerns may be exacerbated. We therefore request that GAO conduct a review of ORH, focusing on the following areas:

- How, if at all, has ORH's mission changed over time, and to what extent is it being met?
- To what extent is ORH structured in a manner that best facilitates its roles and responsibilities (e.g., location in the organizational, reporting structure)?
- How does ORH determine its resource needs (budget and staffing), and how does it work with VHA to secure those resources?
- To what extent does ORH coordinate with other VA/VHA offices (e.g., Veterans Benefits Administration, community care, Tribal Government relations, Tribal Advisory Board,

Connected Care, Research and Development); and, what, if any, duplication and coordination challenges exist?

- What collaborative partnerships exist between ORH and other external organizations; how are they identified; and, how, if at all, are these partnerships assessed for effectiveness in furthering ORH's mission?
- How does ORH determine its research agenda (including any specific focus on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on care); how does it carry out its research agenda; and, to what extent have the results of these activities improved care for veterans living in rural communities?
- What, if any, assessments has VA/VHA conducted of ORH; what were the results; were there recommendations for improvement; and, what changes, if any, have been made as a result?
- How, if at all, has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted ORH's roles and responsibilities, and, what strategies have been implemented to mitigate the effects?

Thank you for your attention to this request. If you have any questions, please contact Jackie Maffucci, Policy Advisor for Senator Sinema at [jackie\\_maffucci@hsgac.senate.gov](mailto:jackie_maffucci@hsgac.senate.gov) or Liz Banicki, Senior Policy Advisor for Senator Sullivan at [liz\\_banicki@sullivan.senate.gov](mailto:liz_banicki@sullivan.senate.gov).

Sincerely,



Kyrsten Sinema  
U.S. Senator



Dan Sullivan  
U.S. Senator