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May 10, 2022

Dr. Teresa Boyd,
VA Northwest Health Network Office
1601 E. 4th Plain Blvd Building 17, Suite 403
Vancouver, WA 98661

Scott Kelter, Director
Jonathan M. Wainwright VAMC
77 Wainwright Drive
Walla Walla, WA 99362-3975

Dear Dr. Boyd and Director Kelter:

I write to reiterate the deep concerns I expressed during my call with you and your staff about the VA's hasty and dangerous proposals to reduce care to Oregon veterans, including downsizing the Veterans Administration Medical Center (VAMC) in Walla Walla. I have been hearing throughout eastern Oregon from veterans that the physical and mental health services at the Walla Walla VAMC are critical to their wellbeing. Simply put, they have well-founded fears that the proposed facility downgrade will reduce the access to vital services they've earned. I intend to hold an online town hall soon for eastern Oregon veterans, so let me outline the concerns I've heard so far and why participation by both VISN 20 and Walla Walla VAMC leaders is a must in that meeting.

Eastern Oregon veterans are in a particularly precarious position. Aside from the La Grande Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) and a few telehealth clinics, they have no in-state resources within 200 miles. Winter roads, lack of public transit, and frequent weather-related freeway closures also hinder access. If these veterans need anything from an X-ray to an appointment with a specialist, they rely on the VAMC or a local referral from VA health staff.

I understand that the VA health care workforce has been stretched and stressed by a global pandemic, and is now facing a backlog of veterans urgently needing treatment and prevention services. I am sure that Walla Walla VAMC, like so many health care providers in the Northwest and across the nation, is struggling to recruit and retain a quality workforce in this environment. Eastern Oregon veterans report that, while they greatly appreciate their VA health care and the staff, they worry about a lack of support and investment for their clinics, delays in travel reimbursement and much needed referrals. They have also voiced concerns about Cerner's electronic health record system impacting their delivery of care, noting technical failures stemming from the program's rollout and expansion.

At my eastern Oregon town halls in late April, both veterans and reporters expressed concerns about the VA's recently released recommendations to the Asset and Infrastructure Review (AIR)

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Commission, which recommends the Walla Walla VAMC be reclassified to a Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC). It also recommends moving the 31-bed Residential Rehabilitation Treatment Program 180 miles north of Walla Walla to Spokane. I find both these recommendations particularly troubling to my constituents in Oregon, who often trek across state lines to receive crucial care from the VA. Adding 180 miles to their commute will effectively cut off access to behavioral health and substance use treatment services. As Chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, I have been holding hearings on mental health access, and the findings are abysmal. There are so few resources for eastern Oregon veterans with depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorders, and substance use disorder. Requiring rural eastern Oregon veterans to compete for scarce beds does not fulfill the VA's responsibility to care for those who serve our country. Further, requiring families to drive four hours from La Grande to Spokane to participate in their veterans' treatment program would likely keep some veterans and their families from participating altogether.

Rural veterans are also alarmed by the toll on staff and their care caused by the new Cerner electronic health records system. News stories indicate that the initial rollout of Cerner at Spokane reportedly caused staff to revert to pen and paper to get veterans the care they need. Eastern Oregon clinic and CBOC staff are trying to adopt Cerner, while working with veterans, but have little or no onsite support. This is not a small problem or infrequent occurrence. In fact, the Cerner system failed during an April 26 congressional oversight hearing on the subject, as representatives from Cerner and experts on the VA's electronic health records programs were testifying before Congress.

I understand that the recommendations to the AIR Commission are not final and that veterans still have an opportunity to provide input. However, this opportunity has not been clearly conveyed to eastern Oregon veterans, Oregon veteran service officers, or elected officials. I understand there is a plan to hold online town halls for veterans, and, as we discussed, I intend to kick off that effort. I have held more than 1,000 town halls in my time as a United States Senator, including a number of town halls specifically for veterans. In order for eastern Oregon veterans to fully understand their options and have a voice in their future health care, such dialogues are absolutely necessary. I will lead the effort to hold an online veterans town hall, and I formally request that you, the leadership of both VISN 20 and Walla Walla VAMC, participate.

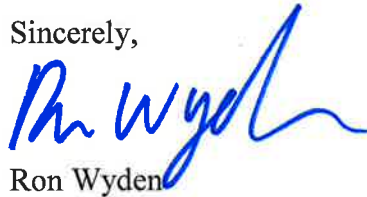
In addition to your participation in a town hall, I ask that you please provide the following information in writing to me by May 25.

1. Explain how moving treatment services away from rural veterans would be beneficial to those veterans.
2. Explain how the input of Oregon veterans was factored into the recommendations provided to the AIR Commission for VISN 20. If no input was solicited or included, please explain why.
3. Provide a detailed explanation for how VISN 20 expects services to be realigned based on the recommendations provided to the AIR Commission.
4. Share a detailed plan for how eastern Oregon veterans and other rural veterans can offer input on the recommendations proposed for VISN 20 before the AIR Commission finalizes its own recommendations to the President.

5. Explain VISN 20's plans to restructure the hiring process.
6. Provide a summary of Walla Walla's plans to clearly and consistently communicate with eastern Oregon veterans on actions that could affect their healthcare.
7. Explain how VISN 20 and Walla Walla VA plan to ensure that Pacific Northwest VA staff have access to ongoing expert support with Cerner, if the VA intends on using and expanding Cerner.

Again, I appreciate our opportunities to have these frank conversations and work together in support of our rural Oregon veterans. I and my staff will be in touch very shortly to organize the town hall.

Sincerely,



Ron Wyden
United States Senator