

July 29, 2021

The Honorable Denis McDonough
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave., NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough,

We write today to draw your attention to several ongoing issues at the Atlanta U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Health Care System.

In Georgia, the Atlanta Metropolitan area health care system serves 126,000 veterans, covering a service area of 120,000 square miles. There are also more than 20 sites of care serving veterans across north Georgia. These facilities provide critical care to veterans who depend on the VA system for their daily, acute, and long-term health needs.

We are committed to ensuring every Georgia veteran who is enrolled or may be enrolled in the VA health care system has access to the treatment they have earned. We, therefore, want to highlight several concerns, both historic and ongoing, to ensure the Department of Veterans Affairs is aware and can support local VA leadership in ensuring they have the resources, funding, and personnel necessary to address these issues as needed.

- *New Phone System:* We have recently heard from many Georgia veterans regarding concerns related to the new phone system that the Atlanta VA recently implemented.¹ Beginning on May 15, 2021, this new system has raised significant issues for veterans who have had a difficult time getting through to VA staff to schedule appointments and get treatment. We have also heard from many veterans that they are unable to schedule an appointment with the VA medical centers in a timely manner. They have been forced to make multiple calls, and the time to schedule an appointment remains prohibitively long, it seems due to the inability to connect and to the backlog in appointments. We understand that local VA leadership has acknowledged the technical issues and is working to address these problems, but we ask that you direct national resources to support their efforts as they remedy this issue. Georgia's veterans need accessible and timely care.
- *Community Care:* We continue to hear from veterans that they are unable to schedule appointments through community care in a timely manner. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a 22% daily increase in requests for Community Care. In May 2021, *The Atlanta Journal Constitution* reported that “number of North Georgia veterans who had

¹ Justin Gray, “Veterans having a hard time reaching the VA Medical Center because of new phone system,” WSB-TV, 7 July 2021. <https://www.wsbtv.com/news/local/veterans-having-hard-time-reaching-va-medical-center-because-new-phone-system/WMDZVWH7JBGB3BKFXOEROTYEKA/>

not gotten a response from the Atlanta VA Health Care System more than 30 days after applying for such help ballooned from about 6,700 last September to more than 18,000 in early May.”² While local leadership has been working to address this backlog, we ask that the Department of Veterans Affairs provide support to address this backlog as well to ensure that as the nation works to recover from the pandemic, Atlanta’s veterans have access to efficient and effective care.

- *Inspector General (IG) Reports:* In Fiscal Year 2020, there were three reports from the Department of Veterans Affairs Office of the Inspector General (VA OIG) related to the Atlanta VA Health Care System: OIG Healthcare Inspection on Radiology/Nuclear Medicine, OIG Healthcare Inspection of Consult Days, and OIG Comprehensive Healthcare Inspection Program Review. While many of the recommendations from these reports have been closed, several remain open. We ask that you support local VA leadership and hold them accountable to closing these recommendations to ensure they address the concerns raised by the OIG.
- *Inventory Issues:* In April 2021, it was reported that the VA hospital in Decatur, Georgia, discovered that over \$120,000 in heart stents had expired.³ This came after a 2019 OIG report previously identified issues with record keeping at the facility and detailed that VA auditors had found \$52,000 in expired stents. The OIG auditors also reported missing implants and records and noted that mismanagement of medical supplies contributed to waste. Given the evident concerns related to expired medical devices and the effects of record mismanagement, we encourage you to work closely with Atlanta VA leadership on this issue to ensure these record keeping issues do not persist and to address any underlying resource or personnel concerns.
- *Construction Funding:* We are aware of—and strongly support—planned funding for important upgrades and construction for facilities in the Atlanta area. We ask that you confirm the requests or planned requests for funding for the following facilities: expanding long stay operations at Trinka Davis Veterans Village; renovating the sixth floor at the Decatur VA Medical Center; constructing a new Women’s Health Center and Administrative Complex; and constructing a new long stay Community Living Center in the Atlanta metro area.
- *Whistleblower Protection:* Historically, there have been concerns raised with whistleblower protection in the VA Southeast Network (VISN 7). Many of these concerns were associated with past leadership. However, we ask that you confirm VA plans and procedures are in place to ensure whistleblower protection moving forward. We believe these protections are critical to ensure that veterans’ care is secure and prioritized and also to immediately address any structural concerns.

² Christopher Quinn, “Backlog of military veterans awaiting medical care grows in Atlanta,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, 5 May 2021. <https://www.ajc.com/news/backlog-of-military-veterans-awaiting-medical-care-grows-in-atlanta/SGTGK6I4RVCOLLWYZ75MJW7D4E/>

³ Christopher Quinn, “Expensive medical supplies expire at Atlanta VA due to poor management,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, 14 April 2021. <https://www.ajc.com/news/expensive-medical-supplies-expire-at-atlanta-va-due-to-poor-management/J545HZBNKKBHJBKDHUCIFKX35PE/>

Georgia is home to close to one million veterans, many in the Atlanta Metropolitan area. We thank you for your continued efforts to support veterans nationally and in Georgia. Many challenges remain, and they must be addressed to ensure our nation's veterans receive the timely and effective care they have earned. We look forward to working with you to address those for our veterans in Georgia.

Sincerely,



Raphael Warnock
U.S. Senator



Jon Ossoff
U.S. Senator



Henry C. "Hank" Johnson Jr.
U.S. Representative



Lucy McBath
U.S. Representative

/s/

Carolyn Bourdeaux
U.S. Representative



Nikema Williams
U.S. Representative