

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 20, 2020

The Honorable Robert Wilkie
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Wilkie:

We are writing out of concern for Illinois Veterans in light of the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, which the World Health Organization has now designated a global pandemic. Currently, nearly 450 cases have been diagnosed in Illinois alone, prompting the Governor to declare a state of emergency. Further troubling are reports of inconsistent screening or testing practices and shortages of critical medical equipment at Chicago-area Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical facilities, as well as indications that the VA may be discounting its “fourth mission” to support the civilian health care system in times of crisis. As such, we urge you to ensure that all VA medical facilities in Illinois are well equipped to promptly respond to this epidemic and provide for the wellbeing of our Veterans as well as VA employees.

There are nearly 600,000 Veterans throughout the state of Illinois, with half of them over the age of 65. This population also has underlying health conditions and tends to be more susceptible to severe illnesses such as COVID-19. Indeed, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has stressed that such populations are at higher risk of serious illness, and even death, from COVID-19. As of March 20, the VA has also confirmed at least 130 positive cases of Veterans with COVID-19 across the country, including one in Chicago.

As many Veterans depend on VA medical facilities as their primary healthcare provider and source of medication, it is critical that the VA continues to provide routine medical care, while also appropriately responding to this serious public health emergency and be prepared in the event of a worsening situation. Accordingly, maintaining appropriate protocols for the screening of all patients, visitors, and staff, having consistent testing practices and contingency plans in place for any potential or confirmed diagnoses, and considering alternative options for care such as expanding telehealth is key. We also urge that VA medical facilities in Illinois continue to work closely with the Illinois Department of Public Health as well as consider working with private laboratories in the event of a worsening crisis.

As noted, we are also extremely dismayed by reports of potential medical supply shortages in Chicago-area VA medical facilities. The CDC has issued guidance on precautions for healthcare facilities and personnel that is critical to maintaining safety, hygiene, and ultimately, helping mitigate the COVID-19 outbreak. This includes recommendations on protective equipment and other resources for patients, visitors, and healthcare staff—including items such as N95 respirators, face masks, gloves, eye protection, gowns, disinfectant, and hand

sanitizer. Shortages of such key resources at Chicago-area VA medical facilities puts both patients and staff at risk, and the VA must act immediately to address any possible shortages of resources.

Further concerning is that what is known as the VA's "fourth mission," to provide hospital and medical services during certain disasters and emergencies under 38 U.S.C. 1785, was recently removed from the VA's list of objectives on its website, as reported by *The Washington Post*. As you know, the VA has historically deployed medical resources and staff to help Veterans and civilians in the wake of both natural and manmade disasters. Under current law, the VA may furnish hospital care and medical services to civilians in times of a major disaster or emergency declared by the President under the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act or when the Secretary of Health and Human Services activates the National Disaster Medical System of the Public Health Service Act. On March 13, President Trump announced such national emergency utilizing the Stafford Act in response to the COVID-19 outbreak.

As such, we request that the VA provide our offices with information about whether the VA is prepared to fulfill its "fourth mission" to support civilian health care systems if needed. We are also requesting information about the number of acute-care and ICU beds currently available within VA medical facilities in the State of Illinois. In addition, we request information about guidance provided to Illinois VA medical facilities, and an assessment about efforts to address any potential cases of COVID-19 at the State's VA medical facilities. This assessment must also include information about screening and testing protocol as well as provide an inventory of critical protective equipment and COVID-19 test kit supplies at Illinois VA medical facilities (along with the VA's plan to quickly address any shortages in such equipment). We expect all information to be relayed to our offices by March 27, 2020, given the urgency of the need to respond to this public health crisis.

It is important that the VA continues to preserve and protect the safety of all Veterans and staff in Illinois VA medical facilities across the country, and provide support to the civilian health care system if called upon. Thank you for your prompt attention to this critical matter.

Sincerely,



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator