

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

April 15, 2024

The Honorable Denis McDonough
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
1722 I Street NW
Washington, DC 20421

Dear Secretary McDonough,

We are writing to request an update on the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) efforts to implement "produce prescription" initiatives within the Veterans Health Administration (VHA).

Nearly 60 percent of Americans have a diet-related chronic health condition, such as heart disease and type 2 diabetes. These conditions claim the lives of more than half a million Americans on an annual basis. In addition, these conditions take a significant economic toll. Diabetes alone accounts for \$327 billion in annual health care expenditures in the United States. Veterans often suffer from higher rates of illness compared to the general population, in part because of the stress and trauma that veterans too often have experienced.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), more than 70 percent of veterans are obese compared to 60 percent of all Americans, 19 percent of veterans have diabetes compared to 16 percent of all Americans, and 12 percent of veterans have heart disease compared to seven percent of all Americans. VA research has found that there is a need for dietary interventions for the health management of veterans with chronic conditions. At the same time, veterans are at a higher risk for food insecurity than the general population, but are less likely to be enrolled in SNAP benefits. As such, it is essential to ensure that veterans have the support needed to address their chronic health conditions, including strategies to address access to healthy, affordable food.

As part of the White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health, President Biden called for "prescription produce" initiatives to be implemented within the VHA. Congress provided \$2 million for the VA to do through the *Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023* (P.L. 117-328). We appreciate that the VHA has worked with the Rockefeller Foundation to establish two "produce prescription" initiatives within VHA facilities in Houston, Texas, and Salt Lake City, Utah. However, we want to understand how the VHA plans to scale such "produce prescription" initiatives across the United States to reach the millions of other veterans who could benefit from these initiatives.

We support the VA's work to improve the health and well-being of veterans and believe that "produce prescription" initiatives may have the potential to support veterans while reducing health care expenditures through the VHA. To help us better understand how Congress can support these efforts, we request that you respond to the following questions by May 13, 2024.

1. As part of the *Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023* (P.L. 117-328), Congress provided \$2 million for VA “to provide guidance and resources for VA facilities to develop local [produce prescription] program and pursue strategies for patient education and outreach.” On April 25, 2023, VA announced that it would partner with the Rockefeller Foundation to expand access to “produce prescription” initiatives within the VHA. How has the VA used the \$2 million appropriated by Congress in FY23?
 - a. If the VA has not used the \$2 million for this MOU with the Rockefeller Foundation, how has the VA used these funds?
 - b. If the VA has not used the \$2 million for this MOU with the Rockefeller Foundation, with what funds, if any, did the VA use for this initiative?

2. There are now two “produce prescription” initiatives at VHA facilities in Houston, Texas, and Salt Lake City, Utah. Does VA plan to expand “produce prescriptions” initiatives to other VHA facilities across the United States using the funds that Congress appropriated?
 - a. If so, when?
 - b. If not, why?

3. Please explain in detail the resources, funding, or legislative authorities that the VA would require to expand “produce prescription” initiatives to other VHA facilities across the United States using the funds that Congress appropriated, including any barriers to doing so.
 - a. We understand that the VA’s financial policies state that the VHA can purchase food or refreshments when part of “the provision of medical treatment to VA beneficiaries under 38 U.S.C. § 7301(b), *e.g.*, in-patient meals.” Please explain in detail the VA’s interpretation of this rule as it relates to “produce prescriptions,” including whether or not it must be amended in order to expand “produce prescriptions” to reach other veterans across the United States.

Sincerely,



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



Chellie Pingree
Member of Congress