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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-4702

ARMED SERVICES

October 23, 2014

Secretary Robert McDonald
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonald,

Congratulations on your recent confirmation as Secretary of Veterans Affairs. From our previous meetings, I know you possess the motivation and skill necessary to ensure we honor our commitments to those who have served. I was pleased to hear you pledge to execute “with excellence” the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014 (the Act). This law is an important step towards rebuilding trust with veterans, though much work remains to be done.

As Veterans Day approaches, I would like to draw your attention to a key issue with the implementation of the Act. Under Section 101 of the Act, a veteran is eligible for non-VA care if she or he lives more than 40 miles from the nearest VA medical facility. This benefit also applies to veterans who must travel by ferry to reach VA care.

Whidbey Island, in my Congressional District, is reachable by both ferry and road, geography that makes implementing Section 101 challenging. I would like to work with your office to ensure veterans receive benefits that make sense.

I am particularly interested in how these provisions will be applied in Coupeville, a town in Central Whidbey that is almost exactly 40 miles via Route 20 from the Community Based Outpatient Clinic in Mount Vernon. Dividing veterans in this community block by block would sow discord, especially given that many veterans receive health care at the VA in Seattle, which they usually reach by ferry.

Under subsection (b)(2)(D)(ii)(II) of Section 101, you have the authority to make a determination that a veteran residing less than 40 miles from the nearest VA facility faces an “unusual or excessive burden” in accessing VA care, and is thus eligible for non-VA care. While I expect many veterans on Whidbey Island will prefer to be seen by VA medical professionals, I urge you to exercise this authority to give them the choice to seek the care that best suits their needs. Additionally, this policy change would likely lead to an increase in the number of veterans

receiving care through local providers, including at Whidbey General in Coupeville. I am confident that the Department will work with these providers and facilities to resolve any issues that may arise surrounding capacity and reimbursement.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. I look forward to working with you on this important matter.

Sincerely,



Rick Larsen

Member of Congress