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U.S. House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

ONE HUNDRED SIXTEENTH CONGRESS

B-234 LONGWORTH HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515

<http://veterans.house.gov>

March 18, 2020

The Honorable Robert Wilkie
 Secretary
 Department of Veterans Affairs
 810 Vermont Avenue, N.W.
 Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We appreciate the updates you gave on Monday's phone calls and your commitment to ensure VA provides daily updates to the Committee on the Veterans Health Administration's (VHA) response to and preparedness for the 2019 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Now that VA has reported 44 cases (including one death), and President Trump has declared a National Emergency, Congress needs timely information to inform the veterans and the American people we serve, provide oversight of the VA's response to the pandemic, and ensure VA is resourced with the personnel, supplies, and infrastructure necessary during this National Emergency.

As this public health emergency evolves almost hourly, Congress must be informed so it can act immediately to protect the health and safety of veterans who may be at significant risk during this pandemic. We need reporting on what VHA, the nation's largest government healthcare system, is experiencing on the ground.

Therefore, we request daily updates in writing to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs that include the following:

1. Number of COVID-19 test kits available to VHA
2. Number of veterans tested, both internally and outside VA
3. Number of employees tested
4. Status of all test results including the number of positive and presumptive positive results and the location and status of those patients
5. Data on testing time: time required to complete testing, both initial testing to establish a presumptive positive and time it takes to receive CDC confirmation
6. Criteria for testing veterans and employees

We request weekly updates in writing that include the following:

1. Number of acute care or ICU beds, current use statistics, and number used to treat COVID-19 patients
2. Number of ventilators and percentage in current use
3. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) supply levels
4. Number of negative pressure beds and current use statistics
5. Pharmaceutical supply levels
6. Current staffing levels, including the number of employees out of work due to illness and/or not at work due to a positive test for COVID-19 or exposure to an individual positive for COVID-19
7. Current guidance given to VA employees and contractors who feel they may have been exposed, have symptoms, or are responsible for a child or family member who must remain home as a result of COVID-19

Please provide the information we request daily starting today, Wednesday, March 18, 2020. Please provide the information we request weekly starting on Friday, March 20, 2020 and respond to our weekly information request no later than close of business Friday of each week. Please provide responses to the attached Congressional Request for Information no later than Wednesday, March 25, 2020. If you have any questions or need to provide additional information, please contact Ray Kelley, Majority Staff Director, at (202) 225-9756 or Jon Towers, Minority Staff Director, at (202) 225-2537.

Sincerely,



Mark Takano
Mark Takano
Chairman
Committee on Veterans' Affairs



David P. Roe
David P. Roe
Ranking Member
Committee on Veterans' Affairs

MT/cm

Enclosures:
Congressional Request for Information



Conor Lamb
Vice Chair
House Veterans' Affairs Committee



Julia Brownley
Chairwoman
Subcommittee on Health



Kathleen Rice
House Veterans' Affairs Committee



Mike Levin
Chairman
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity



Anthony Brindisi
House Veterans' Affairs Committee



Max Rose
House Veterans' Affairs Committee



Chris Pappas
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Subcommittee on
Oversight and Investigations



Elaine Luria
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Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and
Memorial Affairs



Susie Lee
Chairwoman
Subcommittee on
Technology Modernization



Joe Cunningham
House Veterans' Affairs Committee



Gil Cisneros
House Veterans' Affairs Committee



Collin Peterson
House Veterans' Affairs Committee



Colin Z. Allred
House Veterans' Affairs Committee



Lauren Underwood
House Veterans' Affairs Committee



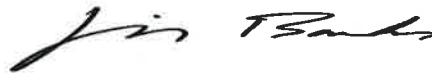
Gus Bilirakis
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance
and Memorial Affairs



Neal Dunn
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Health



Aumua Amata Coleman Radewagen
House Veterans' Affairs Committee



Jim Banks
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Technology Modernization
House Veterans' Affairs Committee



Andy Barr
House Veterans' Affairs Committee



Daniel Meuser
House Veterans' Affairs Committee



Steven C. Watkins, Jr.
House Veterans' Affairs Committee



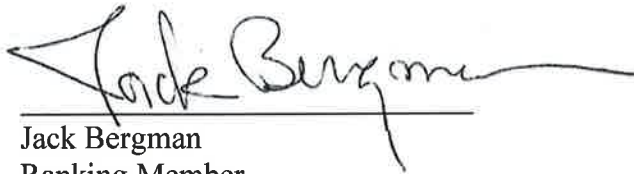
Chip Roy
House Veterans' Affairs Committee



W. Gregory Steube
House Veterans' Affairs Committee



Mike Bost
House Veterans' Affairs Committee



Jack Bergman
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
House Veterans' Affairs Committee

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Department of Veterans Affairs:

- Has VA created an internal task force or team to coordinate responses to the COVID-19 outbreak? If so, what is the disposition of the taskforce or team membership?
- Has VA been asked to join any intergovernmental task forces, or are any existing task forces planning for COVID-19 response?
- What is the VA-wide contingency plan for employees as well as the benefits and services they will provide as the COVID-19 pandemic evolves? Please provide a plan for VHA, the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), and the National Cemetery Administration (NCA).
- What are the foreseen budgetary impacts for VHA, VBA, NCA and VA Central Office?

Veterans Health Administration:

- What is the COVID-19 screening process for patients and visitors at VA medical centers (VAMCs)?
- Will inspections be conducted to ensure adherence to the COVID-19 screening procedures, and who will conduct those inspections?
- What guidance and preparation have been provided to VA security and law enforcement personnel at VAMCs?
- Has VA established nationwide guidance for medical facilities if a patient presents and is believed to have COVID-19?
- Can VA share its plans in the event a facility experiences a COVID-19 outbreak (e.g., staffing, increased bed capacity, etc.)?
- What is the current status of Consolidated Mail Order Pharmacies (CMOPS), and do you anticipate an increase in demand for the service?
- Does VA have a sufficient supply of N95 respirators and other personal protective equipment? What instructions are being disseminated to providers on their use?
- Has VA issued guidance for long-term care facilities that are not community living centers (e.g., assisted living, home health care, and adult day health care)?
- Are COVID-19 test kits available at VA medical facilities nationwide? If not, is VA referring patients in regions with no testing capability who believe they may be exposed to local health departments?
- Are veterans being charged copayments for COVID-19 testing, and treatment? What guidance have been given to VAMCs? Please share any informational materials or memos that have been disseminated to veterans and staff.
- Have VA facilities coordinated their pandemic response plans with federal and tribal partners in the Indian Health Service and Tribal Health Programs?
- How many Title 5 employees does VA anticipate will be needed to rest/sleep at facilities to manage the pandemic?
- When will Spanish language materials be available for veterans and families?

- What is the VCL doing to ensure appropriate back up responders are in place? Do responders have telework capabilities?

Veterans Benefits Administration:

- Will compensation and pension exams continue as scheduled or be scheduled for veterans who need them for their disability claims?
- Does VBA anticipate cancellation of any disability examinations to reduce social spread of COVID-19?
- Will field and regional offices remain open to assist veterans and also process and adjudicate claims?
- What processes or guidance are in place for those U.S. Public Health Service Corps members who may contract COVID-19 during their time in the Corps but then separate or are in the process of separating and contract it?
- Are Veterans Service Representatives (VSRs) and Rating Veterans Service Representatives (RVSRs) prepared to work remotely to continue processing disability claims?
- Does VBA anticipate a reduction in the availability of examiners to conduct disability examinations due to COVID-19?
- How many VSRs and RVSRs are currently teleworking?
- What national guidance is currently in place regarding telework allowance for VBA employees? Which VBA employees are still required to report to their in-office workstation or in-person trainings?
- Are all telework capable VBA employees currently utilizing telework procedures?
- Will VBA make any adjustments to employee production standards for telework employees with children at home?
- What is the total number of daily compensation and pension disability examinations conducted, disaggregated by examinations conducted by VHA and contract examiners?
- Will VBA suspend any time sensitive deadlines for disability claims and appeals? Specifically, will VBA augment deadlines associated with rating reductions or subsequent development letters?

National Cemetery Administration:

- How many NCA employees are currently teleworking?
- What national guidance is currently in place regarding telework allowance for NCA employees? Which NCA employees are still required to report to their in-office workstation?
- Are telework capable NCA employees currently utilizing telework procedures?
- Will funerals of veterans with or without military honors in national or private cemeteries continue as scheduled? Will NCA continue to schedule funerals?

Education Benefits:

- Please provide the number of G.I. Bill benefit recipients, disaggregated by Post 9/11 G.I. Bill and other VA education benefits programs disaggregated by
 - Servicemember, veteran, and dependent, who suspend enrollment entirely (disaggregated by those who suspend due to active duty orders and those who suspend for other reasons);
 - Servicemember, veteran, and dependent, who reduce their enrollment rate or rate of pursuit of education;
 - Servicemembers, veterans, and dependents who are enrolled in educational institutions that decide to provide education entirely online or partially online;
 - Servicemembers, veterans, and dependents who are enrolled in educational institutions that decide to close temporarily or permanently.

- Please provide the numbers of educational institutions and training establishments that close temporarily, close permanently, or move all available courses to an online or distance education format.
- Please provide the number of G.I. Bill participants who receive an overpayment and the amount of the overpayment.
- How will VA classify courses whose terms have yet to begin and are traditionally in-person, but will be taught solely online because of the COVID-19 outbreak?
- Will VA provide institutions a grace period to allow State Approving Agencies (SAAs) to approve programs for online study?
- Will VA recommend similar guidance to the Department of Education's recommendations on how to manage their work study program?
- Under what conditions will VA provide equitable relief for students whose program of education is affected by COVID-19?
- If students self-isolate due to COVID-19 and students cannot complete their courses online will VA restore their benefits?
- Will VA restore benefits to students whose schools do not have the capacity to administer online courses?
- Will VA waive monthly housing allowance (MHA) overpayments for students when their schools temporarily close due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

VA Information Technology:

- What is the number of concurrent users teleworking and accessing VA systems through virtual private network (VPN)? Please provide historical information for a baseline and current teleworking and VPN sessions for comparison.
- What is the average time of a VPN session?
- What is the number of IT Service Management (ITSM) tickets related to VPN or teleworking?

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- What is the utilization percentage of VPN, Citrix, and/or other remote access systems (measured against overall capacity)?
- Does VA plan a capacity or stress test of its VPN, Citrix, and/or other remote access systems? If so, when? Please report the results when available.