

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

September 26, 2022

The Honorable Dennis R. McDonough
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough:

We are writing today to inquire about the current status and intended next steps for supporting veterans at U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) healthcare facilities in New York.

The importance of VA healthcare facilities for our constituents cannot be overstated. At these medical centers and other facilities, veterans can receive specialized care from medical professionals that have deep training in health conditions that uniquely impact the veteran population. Research has consistently shown that the quality of care offered by the VA outperforms that offered to veterans by the private healthcare sector.¹ In New York specifically, research estimates that only a small fraction of civilian providers are prepared to provide culturally competent, tailored, and evidence-based care to veterans.² What's more, the VA's "Fourth Mission" makes these healthcare institutions invaluable to our civilian community during natural disasters like Hurricane Sandy and public health emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic. Climate change will only increase the severity of extreme weather and public health emergencies in our communities, and the Fourth Mission role of the VA facilities will continue to be essential for supporting New Yorkers during these difficult events. Lastly, these medical centers are core teaching institutions for New York's medical professionals in training, helping foster a strong healthcare workforce in New York. VA facilities also produce key medical research and innovation that helps not only veterans but all patients.

We strongly believe that veterans' healthcare should stay public, accessible, affordable, and high-quality. We were deeply concerned that the recommendations provided to the VA by the

¹ Veterans Policy Institute. "Peer-Reviewed Study Summaries on the VA's Superior Care." Accessed 7/28/2022 at https://www.veteranspolicy.org/files/ugd/23193b_37a804e421c746afaf34b515a66dc0bd.pdf

² Taneilian, T., C. Farris et al. 2014. "Ready to Serve: Community-Based Provider Capacity to Deliver Culturally Competent, Quality Mental Health Care to Veterans and Their Families. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2014. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR806.html."

Asset and Infrastructure Review (AIR) process could have led to the closures of the Manhattan VA Medical Center and the Brooklyn VA Medical Center without guaranteeing their replacement. This would have required veterans to travel hours for care, limited access to specialists and mental health professionals, and placed additional strain on the Bronx VA, where there are currently 265 vacancies.

On June 27, a group of bipartisan Senators blocked the AIR Commission from moving forward. In light of this development and given ongoing concerns from constituents about local VA healthcare, we ask the following questions:

1. Recently, you stated that you still intend to use the VA's authority to address the issue of VA infrastructure.³ What changes does the VA plan to implement pertaining to facilities in the New York Metro Area?
2. Government officials, including the Department of the VA Office of Inspector General, have determined that the AIR Commission's market assessments contain flawed, outdated data that underreports VA facility usage. Do you intend to use the AIR Commission's market assessments as a blueprint for decisions on next steps, and if so, which portions of the assessments?⁴ Do you plan to incorporate more updated and reliable data into your planning process?
3. At the Bronx VA, there are 265 vacant positions, including 64 nurse and nurse assistants, 6 psychologists, and 9 social workers.⁵ As a result, we have heard complaints from constituents of long wait times. What actions has the VA taken to remedy this staffing shortage? What, if any, Congressional action is necessary to support the VA in ensuring it is fully staffed?
4. We have heard concerns from constituents about a lack of reproductive healthcare and Obstetrician-Gynecologist providers available to support veterans at facilities across New York City. What actions is the VA taking to remedy this issue?
5. What is the VA's process for notifying Congressional Offices of any Agency-level decisions pertaining to VA facility closures, consolidations, and staffing changes at healthcare facilities in the New York Metro Area?

Thank you for your attention to these pressing issues, and for all you do to support our veteran constituents. We look forward to working with you.

³ VA Secretary Press Conference. July 20 2022. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UpFKk5NFhF0>

⁴ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General. December 20 2021. "MISSION Act Market Assessment Contain Inaccurate Specialty Care Workload Data." Available at <https://www.va.gov/oig/publications/report-summary.asp?id=5082>.

⁵ VA Mission Act Section 505 Data - Human Resources and Administration/Operations, Security, and Preparedness. Accessed July 2022. Available at <https://www.va.gov/employee/va-mission-act-section-505-data/>

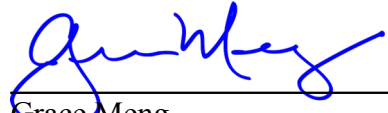
Sincerely,



Jamaal Bowman, Ed.D.
Member of Congress



Nicole Malliotakis
Member of Congress



Grace Meng
Member of Congress



Charles E. Schumer
United States Senator



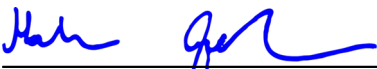
Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator



Yvette D. Clarke
Member of Congress



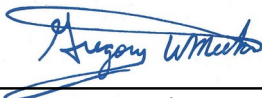
Adriano Espaillat
Member of Congress



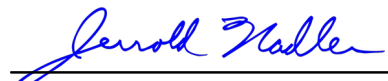
Hakeem Jeffries
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Gregory W. Meeks
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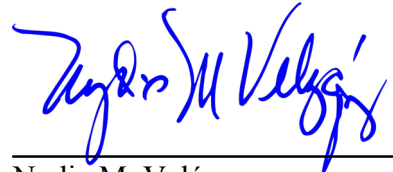
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