

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

January 26, 2012

Stephen DiStasio
Director
VA Black Hills Health Care System
113 Comanche Road
Fort Meade, South Dakota 57741

Dear Mr. DiStasio:

I am writing regarding the letter I sent on December 21, 2011 requesting an additional meeting in the Third District of Nebraska concerning the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) recent proposal to reduce services at the VA Black Hills Health Care System at Hot Springs, South Dakota. I understand you held additional meetings on January 6, 2012 in Alliance and Chadron, and I thank you for doing so.

As I stated in my previous letter, this proposal will impact thousands of veterans in the Third District of Nebraska. While I appreciate you holding additional community meetings so affected veterans could have the opportunity to voice their concerns about the proposal, your timeline for making a final decision on the matter must allow for the careful consideration of all of the feedback from these meetings.

Specifically, I have heard from many veterans who are concerned the proposal significantly will reduce their access to health care by unreasonably increasing the distance they have to travel - as far as 400 miles roundtrip. Furthermore, I have heard concerns about the proposal for the VA to contract with local hospitals and other health care providers for services which will be paid for by the VA. While this model, in theory, will benefit veterans by allowing them to receive local care, many have expressed concern with the criteria to qualify for this program as well as the lack of communication between the VA and the private provider on services which are reimbursable. This proposal, if not implemented well, also will further limit veterans' access to health care.

These proposed changes were announced on December 12, 2011, and I understand you plan to announce a final decision in February. I urge you to allow more time to fully consider the implications of the proposal, review the comments from affected veterans, and assure their access to health care will not be reduced. Until these concerns have been addressed, I request you delay any final decision.

As Co-Chair of the Rural Veterans Caucus, I want to ensure rural veterans in my district and across the country maintain their access to the health care they were promised by serving this country. I am happy to work with you and others during this proposal process in order to ensure the best interests of these veterans. I appreciate consideration of this request and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



ADRIAN SMITH
Member of Congress

AMS/mb