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June 22, 2020

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

Dear Mr. Secretary:

As you are well aware, coronavirus has hit the veteran community hard and veterans living in the Columbus, Georgia area are no different. Less than one percent of the U.S. population has positively tested for coronavirus, yet almost 8.5 percent of the veteran population has tested positive. Because of this, there is even greater urgency to providing an expanded Community-Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) in the Columbus region to enable the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to provide increased and safer healthcare for veterans.

The current 17,000 square foot Columbus CBOC cannot support the ever-increasing demand for services and has not been able to do so for almost a decade. The coronavirus pandemic has exasperated this. The greater Columbus area is home to over 20,000 veterans (according to U.S. Census derived 2018 data) and that number is expected to be significantly higher now. Muscogee County, which incorporates the greater Columbus area, has had 1,147 coronavirus cases and 34 deaths.

As you know, VA awarded a contract for a new CBOC on January 27, 2020 to U.S. Federal Properties Co., LLC, in its third attempt to lease a new building. Under this contract, the new CBOC is not required to be completed until January 2022.

Notwithstanding that the current proposed site for the CBOC will be constructed on the northeast corner of River Road and Mobley Road in Columbus, Georgia, nowhere near the preferred location of local veterans for the new CBOC, the impact of coronavirus on the Columbus veteran community further necessitates that VA reexamine the requirements of the lease. The terms of the current contract are no longer acceptable because during this time of a pandemic, veterans in the Columbus area should not be forced to wait a year and a half for the construction of a brand-

new facility when there is an existing facility currently available that the Columbus CBOC could occupy within one month.

The veteran community in Columbus simply cannot be asked to endure further delay for the expanded access to VA healthcare that has taken on new urgency with coronavirus. VA needs to provide more clinicians to treat veterans with coronavirus and more space to safely separate covid-positive patients from patients being treated without Covid-19. Continuing to treat veterans in the current facility is reckless and irresponsible when there are other options available.

There is a facility available on Comer Avenue that is one block from Piedmont Columbus Regional Hospital. It has 55,000 square feet of class A clinical space, it is located in Central Columbus in the main health district where many veterans currently access services, it is on a central bus route, and most importantly, it is ready for immediate occupancy in 30 days. It also currently houses the VA Job Rehabilitation and Placement Center.

I am writing to request that you examine this building as an alternative option to the new construction on the corner of River Road and Mobley Road. Veterans will have access to increased healthcare in as soon as one month, which will allow VA clinicians time to prepare for a potential second wave of coronavirus and have the space and workforce to more effectively combat the deadly disease. The best interest of veterans should be at the forefront of VA's mission in caring for and treating veterans during the coronavirus pandemic. We urgently and expeditiously need to rectify the dire situation of the current CBOC in Columbus and provide increased space for the necessary health care services the area demands, and the Columbus veterans deserve.

Thank you for your consideration, and I look forward to discussing the Columbus, Georgia CBOC lease further with you.

With warmest personal regards, I remain

Sincerely yours,

  
Sanford D. Bishop, Jr.  
Member of Congress

C.C. Chairwoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies Subcommittee