The Honorable Denis Richard McDonough  
Secretary  
Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20420  

Dear Secretary McDonough:

Earlier this week Senator Joe Manchin announced that he and a bipartisan group of Senators would use procedural motions to block the appointment of Assets and Infrastructure Review (AIR) Commission members, effectively bringing an end to the commission and preventing its recommendations from moving forward. I support this development and hope to work with the Department of Veteran’s Affairs (VA) to develop better plans to move the VA forward to meet future needs in veteran care.

While I appreciate that officials at the VA and the House Veterans Affairs Committee put a large amount of work into the AIR report, I had many concerns about the recommendations it made, and I did not feel they were the best path forward to help veterans. Veterans are our nation’s heroes, and they deserve access to gold-standard and timely care, which unfortunately the AIR report recommendations would not have facilitated.

One major concern I had with the recommendations was a plan to reduce primary care and mental health services at the Jonathan M. Wainwright Medical Center in Walla Walla, reclassifying its status from a VA medical center (VAMC) to a community-based outpatient clinic (CBOC). This would be a severe downgrade for veterans in my district, as some specialty care that veterans currently receive in Walla Walla would shift an hour’s drive away to Richland and other services to Spokane, which is almost three hours away. This is a huge burden for veterans in Southeastern Washington, who already face long wait times for travel pay reimbursements. Shifting services to Richland would also require veterans to drive through hazardous snow and ice in the winter to reach care.

Chief among my concerns with the AIR report was a proposal for Mann-Grandstaff VA Medical Center to establish additional strategic collaborations with local hospitals for inpatient and surgical services, discontinuing those services at Mann-Grandstaff. The Spokane area’s providers are already overburdened and playing catch up coming out of the COVID pandemic. Additionally, Mann-Grandstaff has a history of slow and inefficient referral processes, especially after complications with the Electronic Health Record Modernization (EHRM) rollout. Closing inpatient care at Mann-Grandstaff is not a realistic plan to deal with the needs of veterans in Eastern Washington. It is critical that inpatient services at Mann-Grandstaff are maintained.
I am also troubled that I continue to hear from employees at Mann-Grandstaff that Medical Center Director Dr. Fischer and VISN Director Dr. Boyd are in talks to reduce inpatient services separate from the AIR report recommendations as part of the “clinical restructuring process.” These reports are very concerning, both because it seems like an attempt to bypass Congress’ clear “no” on the AIR Commission recommendations and because the inpatient demands of veterans in my district remain high. Therefore, I am requesting answers to the following questions concerning Mann-Grandstaff:

1. How does the clinical restructuring process work at a VAMC? What are the steps to such a restructuring?
2. Is clinical restructuring approved on a local, VISN, or an overall department level?
3. What is the VA’s stance on individual facilities carrying out changes proposed in the AIR Commission report?
4. Are you aware of any plans to reduce or eliminate inpatient services at Mann-Grandstaff?
5. How has the closure of the Emergency Department and delayed re-opening of 24-Hour Urgent Care affected the in-patient census at Mann-Grandstaff? What is the timeline for returning to 24-Hour service?

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter. Veterans deserve red-carpet treatment for the care they earned while keeping our country safe, and they should not be facing a reduction in critically needed services. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to have your staff contact Matthew Cardenas in my office at matthew.cardenas@mail.house.gov. I look forward to receiving a response to this letter by July 25, 2022.

Sincerely,

Cathy McMorris Rodgers
Member of Congress