

United States Senate

May 11, 2020

The Honorable Robert Wilkie
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20571

Dear Secretary Wilkie:

I am writing regarding the safety of patients and clinical professionals at the John D. Dingell VA Medical Center (VAMC) in Detroit. Staff at VAMC Detroit report shortages of critical medical supplies necessary to perform their duties in light of COVID-19. This comes as VA health care workers nationwide have also expressed inadequate access to essential equipment and in some cases being forced to ration PPE. Clearly more needs to be done to ensure all VA medical providers have a safe work environment.

I am concerned by the disparity between experiences shared by frontline workers and statements from VA leadership. VA recently stated the agency “has not encountered any PPE shortages that have negatively impacted patient care or employee safety.”¹ However, a VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) report from March 26, 2020 found low inventory of testing swabs, hand sanitizer, masks, face shields, goggles, and other supplies² at VAMC Detroit. Notably, the OIG also discovered VAMC Detroit lacks enough ventilators.

- What has been done to address the deficiencies at VAMC Detroit outlined by the OIG?

I am also deeply troubled by a report³ that claims a nurse at VAMC Detroit was directed to return to work despite showing symptoms associated with COVID-19. She later tested positive for the virus. Forcing sick medical staff to return to work is dangerous and completely unacceptable.

- Does VA have a plan for ensuring sick employees have reached full recovery before returning to work? If so, please provide this plan.
- How much sick leave does the VA provide to employees who show symptoms of, or test positive for, COVID-19, and what steps is the VA taking to ensure all employees have access to adequate leave?
- Does VA have enough testing kits and associated supplies to provide for its workforce? If not, what steps is the VA taking to ensure an adequate supply of testing kits and associated supplies?

I appreciate VA’s recent commitment⁴ that it will provide all workers appropriate PPE, rather than just those treating COVID-19 patients. Frankly, this is long overdue.

¹Casey, M. (April 23, 2020) VA Medical Facilities Struggle to Cope With the Coronavirus. *AP*. <https://apnews.com/2e86b87b7e14a56a95518e8fb4127a4b>

² VA Office of Inspector General. (March 26, 2020). OIG Inspection of Veterans Health Administration’s COVID-19 Screening Processes and Pandemic Readiness. Page 20. <https://www.va.gov/oig/pubs/VAOIG-20-02221-120.pdf>

³ Association of Federal Government Employees. (April 6, 2020). A Sick VA Nurse Was Told to Return to work. She Later Tested Positive for COVID-19. <https://www.afge.org/article/an-ill-va-nurse-was-told-to-return-to-work.-she-later-tested-positive-for-covid-19/>

⁴ VA Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Operations. (May 1, 2020) Update: Coronavirus (COVID-19) Mask Use in Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Facilities. Memorandum. <https://www.veterans.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Update%20Coronavirus%20COVID-19%20Mask%20Use%20in%20VHA%20Facilities%20Signed.pdf>

- Does VA have enough PPE to fully implement this policy? If not, what steps is the VA taking to ensure an adequate supply of PPE?
- What is the timeline for achieving 100% implementation of this guidance?
- How can Congress help achieve the goals outlined by this policy?

The brave doctors and nurses working the frontlines everyday are VA's greatest asset. Failing to adequately protect health care providers places them, their families, and veterans at risk. We must do everything possible to improve safety at VA facilities both for staff and veterans receiving care. Please respond to each question raised in this letter as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Gary C. Peters". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Gary" being the most prominent part.

Gary C. Peters
United States Senator