

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

November 4, 2015

COMMITTEES:
AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION AND FORESTRY
BANKING, HOUSING AND
URBAN AFFAIRS
HOMELAND SECURITY AND
GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
INDIAN AFFAIRS
SMALL BUSINESS AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The Honorable Robert McDonald
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary McDonald,

I am writing with regard to the pressing need for a full-time Vet Center in Grand Forks, North Dakota to better serve our local veteran population and urge you to include the necessary resources in the VA budget for fiscal year 2017 to establish this vital center for veterans in this region.

In North Dakota, we are experiencing a devastating trend of homelessness among our veteran population. From 2006 to 2013, the percentage of homeless veterans in North Dakota grew from nine percent to 19 percent – a 10 percent increase – while the rest of the nation experienced a 33 percent decrease in the percentage of homeless veterans over much of the same period, from 2009 to 2014. Along with the surge of homeless veterans in our state, we have lost more servicemembers to suicide than in combat since the start of the Global War on Terror. It remains unfortunate that homeless veterans are more likely to suffer from mental illnesses, health conditions, and substance abuse than other homeless adults, which is why it is so critical that we ensure our underserved veterans have the resources they need, including readjustment counseling services, so they and their families can truly make a successful transition back into civilian life.

While Grand Forks County comprises one of our state's largest military and veteran communities, it is unlike several other communities of its size because it, along with East Grand Forks in Polk County, Minnesota, lacks the crucial support element of a Vet Center for more than 7,500 veterans and their families. Our underserved population also includes approximately 1,300 airmen with nearly 1,400 family members at the Grand Forks Air Force Base; as many as 350 guardsmen serving the 1st Battalion of the 188th Air Defense Artillery Regiment – North Dakota's most deployed unit since September 11, 2001; and even more eligible veterans in surrounding areas. Approximately 79 percent of North Dakota veterans have served in wartime, one of the highest rates in the nation, and we also have one of the highest rates of young veterans between 20 and 34 years old. Not only do these figures demonstrate an exceptional commitment to service during challenging times for our military, they also reveal a growing demand for services among a group of veterans who have the greater part of their lives ahead of them.

The upward trends of veteran homelessness and high suicide rates cannot continue as our veterans respond to the challenges of life after the military. While some challenges are inevitable, the brave men and women who served our country should not have to face them

alone. Vet Centers, as you are well aware, address many of these issues by providing necessary – and oftentimes life-saving – counseling, screening, and referral services to veterans in some of the most vulnerable conditions. The unique nature of a Vet Center exemplifies the Department’s core value of choosing “the harder right instead of the easier wrong” by providing same-day counseling services, offering such services from fellow veterans in a confidential setting, maintaining nontraditional operating hours to accommodate work schedules, and utilizing non-clinical environments to avoid stigmas often associated with obtaining mental health care services. Certain services are also extended to family members who are not immune to the unique challenges of military life but stand by their loved ones during times of hardship. The contributions of a Vet Center would be invaluable to the underserved veteran population in Grand Forks and the surrounding areas.

When we had the opportunity to meet prior to your confirmation in the Senate, I truly appreciated your commitment to work in partnership with Congress to improve services for veterans. I firmly believe that establishing a Vet Center in Grand Forks would have a meaningful and lasting impact on fulfilling this goal in my state. I have also enclosed letters, from the Mayor of Grand Forks, Chair of the Grand Forks Commission, and several Veterans Service Officers supporting this request.

As you and your team consider our veterans’ imminent needs across the nation and prepare your fiscal year 2017 budget, I ask that you recognize the importance of establishing this Vet Center and include an adequate funding allocation within the Medical Services – Readjustment Counseling Service account.

I look forward to our continued work together on behalf of our nation’s veterans and appreciate your consideration of this important request for my state. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns, or if you would like to discuss this issue in greater detail.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Heidi Heitkamp". The signature is stylized with a large, looped "H" and a cursive "Heitkamp".

Heidi Heitkamp
United States Senate

Enclosures