

## United States Senate

February 21, 2020

Dr. Joan McInerney  
Network Director, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
VISN 2 VA New York/New Jersey VA Health Care Network  
130 W. Kingsbridge Road  
Building 16  
Bronx, New York 10468

Dear Dr. McInerney:

I am writing to express my support for the establishment of a U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Women's Health Clinic in Secaucus, New Jersey. This proposed clinic would provide necessary gender-specific healthcare to the over 6,330 female veterans that reside in Bergen, Passaic, Hudson, Morris, and Essex counties.<sup>1</sup> As you are aware, New Jersey is home to almost 30,000 female veterans, 3,200 of which utilize the VA New Jersey Health Care System for medical services.

Female veterans often experience limited programming for gender-specific care at facilities across the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). Although the VA East Orange Medical Center does offer services specifically for female veterans, these services are extremely limited. At last count by my office, there was only a single gynecologist on staff – and employed only part-time, at that. Despite the severe inadequacy of women's health services at the East Orange VA, calls from patients and advocates for a new, much-needed Women's Health Clinic in northern New Jersey have gone ignored. There is precedent supporting the construction of such a clinic in northern New Jersey: VA health care systems across the country have created clinics specifically for female veterans in order to increase rates of enrollment, remedy critical staffing shortages, and provide essential healthcare services. Furthermore, to get to the East Orange VA, many female veterans residing in Bergen, Hudson, and Passaic counties must travel over 40 minutes each way, exceeding current travel requirements established by the VA MISSION Act for primary and specialty care.

Further underscoring the need for a separate women's clinic are the significant complaints of sexual harassment, misconduct, and assault of female veterans who utilize the New Jersey VA Medical Centers and Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOC). At a roundtable meeting I convened two years ago with female veterans and VA leadership, advocates informed the VA directly of the multiple occurrences of sexual harassment and bias that female veterans experience while using both the VA East Orange Medical Center and the Lyons VA Medical Center. In order to increase the rate of user safety and comfort, the group advocated for the creation of a Women's Health Clinic, which would provide gender specific-care, mental health counseling for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Military Sexual Trauma (MST), as well as family planning, and dual-diagnosis services. After conversations with the Director of the VA New Jersey Health Care System in the months following that roundtable, the group identified a space in the same building as the Secaucus Vet Center and requested support for an agreement that would allow the VA to lease the space for clinical purposes. It is my understanding that the requested space is currently leased by the VA Office of Compliance and Business Integrity, and while the VA New Jersey Health Care System has taken some steps to identify how that space could become a

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<sup>1</sup> VA Office of Policy and Planning. "National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics: Veteran Population." Veteran Population: Population Tables, The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 8 Nov. 2019, [www.va.gov/vetdata/veteran\\_population.asp](http://www.va.gov/vetdata/veteran_population.asp).

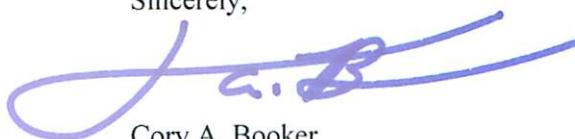
viable home for a Women's Health Clinic, progress in both lease transfer and clinical programming have completely stalled. For the past year, my office and community leaders have raised concerns over the clinic's delayed timeline, and received minimal response from the VA regarding your plans and timeline.

In order to ensure the delivery of more inclusive healthcare options for female veterans in New Jersey, I respectfully request complete written responses to the following questions:

- For the VA East Orange Medical Center, the Lyons VA Medical Center, and the CBOCs:
  - How many gynecologists and gender-specific healthcare providers are employed full-time?
  - What specific women's healthcare services are available at each of these VA facilities?
  - At which facilities are mammograms available?
- What is the current status of the VA New Jersey Health Care System's request to procure the current lease from the VA Office of Compliance and Business Integrity to utilize the currently mostly-vacant space for a Women's Health Clinic?
- If the identified Secaucus space is not viable, what steps are needed to identify and submit additional locations for clinical consideration?
- It is my understanding that the Brick CBOC is the only clinic in state that will offer women's health services with a separate entrance. As female veterans residing in northern New Jersey are prevented from using the Women's Clinic at the Brick CBOC under current MISSION Act travel regulations, I believe offering only one clinic in the state presents a severe disparity in quality of care for female veterans simply due to their geographic location. Please provide the population criteria and needs assessment that allowed Brick to establish a Women's Health Clinic.
- In the absence of progress on the creation of a Women's Health Clinic, advocates have requested that leadership at the VA New Jersey Health Care System offer rotating female-only hours each month across various providers at both the VA East Orange and Lyons VA Medical Centers. It is my understanding that several VA Health Care systems across the country already provide this service.
  - Do any New Jersey VA Hospitals or CBOCs offer rotating gender-specific hours, or have a stand-alone women's clinic in state? Please provide a list of facilities, if so.
  - Is the VA New Jersey Health Care System working to implement the requested rotation clinic hours at East Orange? If not, what is the rationale as to why they have yet to be offered at either medical center or CBOC in state?
- Understanding that the VA New Jersey Health Care System can potentially provide care to up-to 30,000 female veterans, please provide a list of other states with similar female veteran populations and the women's health services available at each.

Our female veterans have earned their benefits just as their male counterparts have. Thank you for your time and attention to this important concern. I look forward to working with you to ensure that all of our female veterans can safely receive the quality benefits that they deserve in a safe and comfortable environment.

Sincerely,



Cory A. Booker  
United States Senator

CC: Vincent Immiti, Director, VA New Jersey Health Care System