

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

March 11, 2021

The Honorable Dennis McDonough
Secretary, U.S Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough:

We write to express our support for the establishment of a U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Vet Center in Northwest, New Jersey – servicing veterans residing in Morris, Sussex, Warren, and Hunterdon counties. Today, New Jersey has only five Vet Centers serving the state’s 350,000 veterans, 36,000 of which reside in the state’s four northwestern counties.¹ We respectfully request that your administration authorize the creation of a sixth Vet Center in New Jersey, which would provide necessary counseling and support services to many thousands of veterans residing in the northwestern part of the state.

As you know, Vet Centers are critical community-based counseling centers that provide social and psychological services, including professional readjustment counseling, marriage counseling, and family counseling to eligible Veterans, active duty service members, Reservists, members of the National Guard, and their families. The facilities and services are notably different from those in other VA care settings (e.g. hospitals, clinics, etc.) in a number of important aspects which increase accessibility, interest, and utilization. For example, by offering services during non-traditional hours, Vet Centers are uniquely positioned to allow women veterans, working veterans, and their spouses to receive services at times that fit within their schedules. Unlike mental health appointments at VA hospitals or clinics, children are allowed in all Vet Center facilities, thereby allowing parents to receive counseling services without the burden of obtaining childcare during treatment sessions. All Vet Center treatment is confidential, adding an extra level of security for users who need help but are concerned that receiving treatment could impact their current employment or deployment orders. Finally, Vet Centers do not restrict eligibility based on discharge status or VA health care enrollment, therefore allowing a greater number of veterans to utilize Vet Center services.

Today, the VA operates five Vet Centers in New Jersey, located in Bloomfield Township, Egg Harbor Township, Ewing Township, Lakewood Township, and Secaucus Township. Currently, veterans residing in Morris, Sussex, Warren, and Hunterdon counties utilize the Vet Centers located in either Bloomfield, Secaucus, or Ewing– placing a severe travel burden on individuals who need to travel, sometimes over an hour, to receive necessary mental health services. Due to the increased demand at both the Secaucus and Bloomfield Vet Centers, new clients are currently being referred to out-of-state counselors. While this provides immediate access for individuals requiring Vet Center services, it is merely a temporary solution because once in-person visits can

¹ https://www.va.gov/vetdata/veteran_population.asp

resume, clients should not have to travel outside their home-state to receive care. Veterans currently seeing an out-of-state counselor via telehealth will be required to maintain service virtually, or will be reassigned to a new counselor in a closer Vet Center. Both options provide a disruption in service for the client, as veterans will either have to start over with a new counselor, or continue utilizing telemedicine rather than the more effective and/or preferred in-person mental health treatments.

Finally, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many veterans are reporting increased rates of hypervigilance, isolation, anxiety, and stress. As the VA continues to prioritize increasing access to mental health services aimed at preventing veteran suicide, we must ensure that veterans and their families have mental health services which are confidential, easily accessible, and tailored to their needs. By establishing a sixth Vet Center in New Jersey, the VA will be able to continue to provide quality counseling services to veterans, service members, Reservists, members of the National Guard, and their families in an accessible location closer to their homes. Additionally, the creation of a sixth Vet Center will remedy overcapacity issues at current VA Vet Centers, therefore ensuring no veteran is sent out-of-state to receive care.

Thank you for your time and attention to this important request. Without the selfless service of our troops and the sacrifices of their families, we would never be able to enjoy the freedoms that make the United States of America so extraordinary. We stand ready to work with you and your administration to ensure that all those who wish to utilize Vet Center services can do so locally.

Sincerely,

A blue ink signature of Cory A. Booker, featuring a stylized 'C' and 'B'.

Cory A. Booker
United States Senator

A blue ink signature of Mikie Sherill, written in a cursive style.

Mikie Sherill
Member of Congress

A blue ink signature of Tom Malinowski, written in a cursive style.

Tom Malinowski
Member of Congress

A blue ink signature of Josh Gottheimer, written in a cursive style.

Josh Gottheimer
Member of Congress