

## United States Senate

December 1, 2021

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

Dear Secretary McDonough:

On November 20<sup>th</sup>, Mr. Chaoe Perry, a 24-year-old New Jersey veteran, attempted suicide by setting fire to his body at a gas station in Atlantic City while experiencing a mental health crisis. Prior to this incident, Mr. Perry had been receiving care through the Wilmington VA Medical Center from providers at the Northfield Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC). Tragically, this is not the first time that a veteran in Atlantic City resorted to self-harm in response to the limited availability of local VA mental health services. In 2016, New Jersey veteran Mr. Charles Ingram died by suicide outside of the same VA CBOC due to inadequate access to care, insufficient availability of tele-mental healthcare professionals, and scheduling delays. While it is my understanding that some of these issues have since been addressed, I remain concerned over the limited mental health infrastructure available to South Jersey's veterans, and I strongly and urgently call on your administration to provide additional resources to the state in response. For the past several years, I have called on the VA to expand health care services in South Jersey, and am devastated and outraged that these tragedies continue in Atlantic County and elsewhere.

In order to ensure that our veterans receive the highest quality of care possible, especially those in need of immediate mental health services, I request that your administration provide rapid and robust suicide prevention programming in South Jersey. Veterans in South Jersey must travel several hours to receive care at the Wilmington VA Medical Center or wait for an appointment at a local VA CBOC in order to obtain necessary suicide prevention or mental health services. Currently, the Wilmington VA Medical Center does not have the authority to imbed designated staff in local 24/7 crisis teams, thereby limiting the VA's accessibility when veterans require immediate assistance. These barriers to immediate access for veterans in need are a burden on South Jersey veterans and have clearly impacted the lives and well-being of my constituents. By placing more providers on the ground in South Jersey, the VA could access veterans in a rapid, community-based fashion, thereby increasing the VA's ability to actually reach any and all veterans in need. Additionally, as the VA continues to prioritize suicide prevention programming, I urge you to work with New Jersey's local veteran leaders and VA providers on creating accessible and scalable programs to increase access to mental health providers, including counselors, therapists, caseworkers, social workers, and patient advocates. Finally, I request full transparency and regular updates from both your office and the Wilmington VA Medical Center about the investigations into Mr. Perry's case, as well as any subsequent reports and updated policies are published.

We will never be able to fully repay America's soldiers and veterans for their sacrifice and their service to our country, but we can and we must provide them with the best possible care through the VA. It is only by expanding access to mental health providers and services in South Jersey that we prevent future veteran suicide attempts and build a more efficient, more accessible VA healthcare network for our veterans and their families. Thank you for your time and attention to these important concerns.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'C. Booker', with a stylized flourish extending to the right.

Cory A. Booker  
United States Senator