

United States Senate

June 12, 2020

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

Dear Secretary Wilkie:

I write to express my concerns over recent reports that New Jersey is currently leading the nation as the state with the highest number of COVID-19 related cases and deaths occurring at VA Medical Centers.¹ Nationally, the VA has reported over 16,500 confirmed cases of coronavirus, and nearly 1,500 deaths. In New Jersey, the East Orange VA Medical Center accounts for approximately 6% of all cases in the country, and 9% of all deaths.² These numbers are alarming, and I am deeply concerned that the VA New Jersey Health Care System is not doing enough to mitigate viral transmission, supply staff with sufficient Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), provide oversight of VA facilities combatting the virus, and report data. In order to ensure our veterans are provided with the best possible care during the COVID-19 pandemic, I strongly urge your administration to develop a more robust plan to address the rising fatality rate in the VA New Jersey Health Care System, while also initiating a complete review of the system's current policies and procedures related to patient care, employee health and safety, and transparency.

My office has heard from several New Jersey veterans who utilize the VA New Jersey Health Care System with concerns that the VA Medical Centers are not providing adequate medical care to veterans with COVID-19 symptoms, are not enforcing social distancing requirements, and are offering little transparency on plans to mitigate viral transmission and decrease fatalities. Specifically, in late March, one of my constituents attempted to receive care at the East Orange VA Medical Center after presenting with symptoms of COVID-19. Despite presenting COVID-19 symptoms, including a prolonged high-grade fever, coughing, and gastrointestinal issues, the veteran was informed that since the East Orange VA Medical Center had a limited number of test kits, the facility was only testing elderly veterans for the virus. The veteran was sent home with medication for gastrointestinal issues, but needed to be transported by ambulance to a local hospital shortly thereafter with shortness of breath and difficulty breathing. At a local hospital, the veteran tested positive for COVID-19 and was admitted for several days. This type of care rendered by the VA is not only contrary to CDC guidelines, but completely unacceptable. Veterans whose symptoms continue to worsen without diagnosis and treatment should not be put at further risk. My office alerted your staff, as well as staff at the East Orange VA Medical Center about this specific case, and the response did not adequately clarify the facility procedure that led to this oversight in care.

Sending symptomatic veterans back to their homes without proper testing is counter to efforts that the VA should be undertaking to help curb the spread of the virus. VA medical facilities must be prepared to render appropriate medical care for all COVID-19 related health issues for patients not only to protect the health and safety of our veterans and their families, but also to reduce the strain on our region's already overburdened hospitals.

¹ <https://www.accesstocare.va.gov/Healthcare/COVID19NationalSummary>

² <https://www.accesstocare.va.gov/Healthcare/COVID19NationalSummary>

I am also deeply concerned about reports from veterans that both the VA East Orange Medical Center and the Lyons VA Medical Center are not enforcing social distancing guidelines, and that the Lyons VA Medical Center lacks adequate screening for staff, patients, visitors, and delivery drivers before entering the facility. Veterans have reported that at the Lyons VA, leadership is not providing staff members with information about which residents have tested positive for COVID-19, endangering both staff and the veterans residing in the facility. According to New Jersey's state website, there have been 171 COVID-19 confirmed cases and 47 deaths at the VA Lyons Medical Center.³ Despite fatalities and confirmed cases, COVID-19 data from Lyons does not appear on the VA's COVID-19 National Summary, and leadership at the New Jersey VA Health Care System has yet to make any announcement on its updated procedures to address the outbreak.

Employees at the Lyons VA Medical Center have also reported that access to PPE, masks and hand sanitizer in particular, is inconsistent. According to one employee who contacted my office, access to PPE is limited – forcing front line healthcare workers to privately store away used masks, gloves, or gowns to reuse the next day in case the facility does not provide PPE again. This is especially concerning, as inadequate access to PPE increases the rate of viral transmission to staff, while also endangering employees with preexisting medical conditions.⁴ Nationally, over 2,000 VA healthcare workers have contracted the coronavirus, and sadly, 34 have died.⁵ Of those 34 deaths, six have been employees of the New Jersey VA Health Care System – the highest of any other health care system in the nation.⁶ In your May 28th testimony to the U.S. House Committee on Appropriations, you stated that VA staff have always had proper access to PPE⁷, yet news outlets and staff reports detail that VA hospitals continue to struggle to meet PPE demands.⁸ I strongly urge you to fully disclose to Congress documentation that details the department's PPE supply and identifies facilities with critical PPE shortages.

Thank you for your time and attention to these important concerns. I stand ready to work with you and your team to ensure that our veterans, their families, and the employees of the VA are provided with the highest quality of care during the COVID-19 pandemic. We owe our veterans a debt of gratitude that can never be repaid, and we must continue to do everything in our power to prevent the deadly spread of COVID-19 in our VA Medical Centers.

Sincerely,



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator

³ https://www.state.nj.us/health/healthfacilities/documents/LTC_Facilities_Outbreaks_List.pdf

⁴ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2020/04/24/veterans-va-coronavirus/?arc404=true>

⁵ <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/494610-va-under-fire-as-coronavirus-infections-among-veterans-staff-surge>

⁶ <https://www.accessocare.va.gov/Healthcare/COVID19EmployeeDeaths>

⁷ <https://connectingvets.radio.com/articles/veterans-affairs-secretary-defends-virus-response>

⁸ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/22/politics/veterans-affairs-memo-ppe-shortage-coronavirus/index.html>