

March 18, 2020

The Honorable Robert Wilkie
Secretary
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Wilkie,

West Virginia is one of the most patriotic states in the country with a long history of answering the call to defend our nation. That unique service, however, also makes West Virginia Veterans uniquely vulnerable to the global pandemic we are now battling. Our more than 140,000 Veterans are older and have higher levels of pre-existing conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, and lung disease that make them especially susceptible to developing a severe illness if they become infected with the virus. I am also concerned about the dedicated Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) staff on the front lines of the the 2019 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic response. I fear that the VA is not fully prepared, equipped, or staffed to respond to the coming crisis in West Virginia.

As you know, West Virginia has one of the oldest Veteran populations in the country with 60% of our Veterans older than the age of 60. Only 15% of West Virginia Veterans have served post-9/11, the rest have served in WWII, Korea, Vietnam, and Gulf War eras. Additionally, the most recent VA Annual Benefits Report (ABR) shows that 36,265 West Virginia Veterans of all ages, including Post-9/11 Veterans, are receiving disability compensation, a signal that at least a quarter of our younger Veteran population has underlying health conditions. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) classifies older adults and people with serious chronic medical conditions as higher risk for getting very sick from COVID-19, putting a majority of West Virginia Veterans at higher risk. In fact, a recent Kaiser Family Foundation report identified West Virginia as the most at risk population for developing a serious illness associated with COVID-19.

For many of these Veterans, the VA is their sole source of healthcare. If COVID-19 spreads in West Virginia, our VA facilities will see an unprecedented, and potentially overwhelming, rise in demand for treatment. It is my understanding that as of today there are 65 current vacancies for staff at VA facilities in West Virginia on USA Jobs, for key positions such as Emergency Medicine Physician, Chief Geriatrics Physician, Emergency Management Specialist, and Registered Nurses. This pandemic requires all hands-on deck. I stand by ready to help you and the VA in any way to fill these positions and maintain appropriate staffing levels to support Veterans across West Virginia throughout the COVID-19 crisis.

In order to better understand the level of preparedness of the VA facilities in West Virginia for COVID-19, please provide responses to the following questions:

1. What actions is the VA taking to quickly equip and train staff at VA facilities in West Virginia to prevent the spread of the virus?
2. Do West Virginia VA facilities have a sufficient supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) such as gloves, gowns, face shields, and masks for the COVID-19 response?
3. How many Veterans can West Virginia VA facilities currently test for COVID-19? What actions is the VA taking to ramp up testing capacity for every VAMC and CBOC in West Virginia?
4. How many respirators and ventilators do West Virginia VA facilities have to treat Veterans severely affected by COVID-19? What are you doing to supply such equipment to West Virginia VA facilities for a surge of COVID-19 patients?

The safety and well-being of every West Virginian must remain our top priority. Veterans across West Virginia have raised their hand to defend and protect our nation and are no strangers to thriving during difficult times. However, the fact is that West Virginia Veterans' age and the physical nature of military service make them uniquely vulnerable to this threat. We must do everything we can to protect and care for these Veterans, who have already given so much, during this unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Joe Manchin III". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

U.S. Senator Joe Manchin III