

Senator Tim Johnson Statement
House Veterans Affairs Committee Hot Springs, SD Field Hearing
August 14, 2014

Mr. Chairman, throughout the country the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) faces challenges in providing access to care for veterans in rural America. This is certainly true here in Western South Dakota. Many veterans in the Black Hills Health Care System (BHHCS) have to travel hundreds of miles for an appointment at a VA facility. That's why I was so concerned when the VA announced their proposed restructuring of the BHHCS in December 2011. Under this proposal, the VA hospital in Hot Springs would close and be replaced by a clinic, and the Domiciliary would move to Rapid City. While the VA maintains this proposal will allow veterans to receive care closer to home due to partnerships with private providers and the Indian Health Service, I am concerned that these are based on assumptions of partnerships, not confirmed arrangements. I am worried that if carried out, this restructuring proposal will actually result in veterans having to travel farther to receive care.

From the beginning, I have joined with the region's veterans, Hot Springs community, and South Dakota Congressional Delegation to express our objection to this proposal. Over the past 2.5 years, we have shared with the VA our concerns, raised important questions, and suggested alternatives. As you have heard today, a robust citizen-led Save the VA group has formed and spent countless hours on this cause. The people of Hot Springs are proud that their community is "The Veterans Town" and are passionate about keeping that legacy for years to come.

I have been proud to work with the Save the VA group and my colleagues in the Senate and House of Representatives on this important issue. In December 2012, when then-VA Secretary Eric Shinseki turned down our request for him to meet with the Save the VA group, I personally called the Secretary and convinced him to change his mind. Secretary Shinseki met with the Save the VA representatives and members of the South Dakota, Wyoming, and Nebraska delegations in Washington, D.C., on January 28, 2013. I continue to believe it's important that the VA leadership hears directly from those impacted by the proposed realignment and recently led the South Dakota delegation in a letter inviting the new VA Secretary to visit Hot Springs.

As the Chairman of the Senate Military Construction and VA Appropriations Subcommittee, I was surprised when the VA's Fiscal Year 2014 Budget Request included a requested authorization for a \$9.9 million annual lease for a new domiciliary in Rapid City, SD. This proposal was in complete contrast to the VA's continued assurances that no final decision had been made regarding the BHHCS realignment. I pressed Sec. Shinseki about this at my Subcommittee's VA budget hearing in April 2013. He admitted its inclusion was a mistake, apologized, and promised to notify the authorizing committees of the error.

Nevertheless, the VA has continued to pursue the BHHCS realignment. As Chairman of the VA Appropriations Subcommittee, I crafted provisions in the Fiscal Year 2015 spending bill to put the VA's proposed realignment for the BHHCS on hold. This language prohibits any FY 2015 funds from being used to close hospitals, domiciliaries, or clinics; diminish health care services; or conduct an environmental assessment within VISN 23 until an extensive report is completed. This report needs to include a national realignment strategy that features a detailed description of

realignment plans within each of the VA's regions. The report must also have a cost/benefit analysis of each of the planned realignments, including the cost of replacing VA services with contract care or other outsourced services. In addition, the report will contain an analysis of how any such planned realignment of services will impact access to care for vets living in rural or highly rural areas, including travel distances and transportation costs to access a VA medical facility and availability of local specialty and primary care. I remain highly skeptical that the VA's proposal for the Black Hills Health Care System is the right thing for vets in Western South Dakota and believe this report will provide information and analysis that is sorely needed.

I am committed to working with the Hot Springs community, members of Congress, and the Administration to ensure the Hot Springs VA continues to provide critical services. I appreciate the opportunity to share my thoughts with the committee today.