

## **U.S. Senators/Representatives seek meeting with VA leadership**

*Posted: Oct 02, 2012 4:04 PM MDT*

By Cindy Davis - [email](#)

Members of South Dakota's, Wyoming's and Nebraska's congressional delegations have sent a letter to U.S. Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki to request a meeting in Hot Springs regarding the proposed changes to the Black Hills Health Care System.

The Senators and Representatives expressed "frustration and disappointment" in how proposed changes to the system have progressed.

It was sparked by a meeting last month between Veterans Affairs leadership and the Save the VA Committee where communications broke down.

The senators and representative want to hear directly from the members of the community, our veterans, and other stakeholders directly affected.

Stephen DiStasio, Director of the Black Hills Healthcare System responded in a statement, "Everyone is after the same thing, we all want the highest level of care. I think the committee meeting with the Senators and Representatives is a worthwhile and objective pursuit for them."

<http://www.kotatv.com/story/19709964/us-senatorsrepresentative-seek-meeting-with-va-leadership>

## Delegation requests meeting with VA Secretary Shinseki

October 02, 2012 2:01 pm

### *Asks that it take place in Hot Springs*

WASHINGTON, D.C. – South Dakota’s Congressional delegation fired a strongly worded letter off to U.S. Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki, expressing disappointment at the recent break down in discussions between the Save the VA Committee and officials from the Black Hills Health Care System.

The letter also requests a meeting with Shinseki, to take place in Hot Springs.

The delegation was joined by Senators Mike Enzi, Representative Cynthia Lummis and Senator John Barrasso of Wyoming as well as Nebraska Senator Mike Johanns and Representative Adrian Smith.

The Senators and Representatives expressed “frustration and disappointment” in how proposed changes to the BHHCS have progressed. The BHHCS gave its word that the process would be open, transparent, and inclusive. However, a Sept. 10 meeting between BHHCS officials and the Save the VA Committee broke down when the BHHCS said it was not in a position to negotiate on its proposal. Since that time, many stakeholders have lost trust in the process and fear that the actions of the BHHCS over the past ten months were all for show.

The Senators and Representatives wrote: “We remain committed to ensuring that our veterans receive the highest quality of care and believe that their voices and concerns need to be a part of any proposed changes. ... Given the recent developments as to how this process is moving forward, we are requesting a meeting with you, the tri-state congressional delegation and members of the Save the VA Committee in Hot Springs, SD. We believe that it is important you hear directly from the members of the community, our veterans, and other stakeholders directly affected.”

[http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/communities/hot-springs/delegation-requests-meeting-with-va-secretary-shinseki/article\\_d50134c0-0ccb-11e2-9081-001a4bcf887a.html](http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/communities/hot-springs/delegation-requests-meeting-with-va-secretary-shinseki/article_d50134c0-0ccb-11e2-9081-001a4bcf887a.html)

## Save the VA grateful for congressional support

October 03, 2012 3:12 pm

The letter dated Oct. 2, from the South Dakota Congressional delegation, requesting that a meeting on the future of the Hot Springs VA be arranged with Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki and that the meeting take place in Hot Springs has been gratefully received by the local Save the VA Committee.

The group's executive committee issued a press release to that effect on Wednesday afternoon, expressing its thanks to the South Dakota delegation and acknowledging the support of Senators and Representatives from both Nebraska and Wyoming.

There has been no response from Secretary Shinseki's office and no meeting has been scheduled at this time.

Here is the complete text of the Save the VA Executive Committee press release.

*Save the VA Thanks Congressional Delegations Letter to Secretary Shinseki Supports Veteran Issues*

*Hot Springs, SD October 3, 2012: On behalf of the Save the VA Committee I would like to thank the Congressional delegations from South Dakota, Wyoming and Nebraska for submitting the letter to Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki asking for a meeting in Hot Springs to address the proposals concerning the VA Medical Center.*

*The Save the VA Committee has worked with the veterans from these states to craft solutions which incorporate access to care, quality of care and cost of care to meet the needs of our nation's heroes; past, present and future.*

*We look forward to having an open and honest discussion with the Congressional delegations and Secretary Shinseki to arrive at decisions that are in the best interests of all of our veterans; urban and rural.*

*The support given to us by the Senators and Representatives from Wyoming, Nebraska and South Dakota exhibit a commitment to the men and women who have served their country.*

*Together we can develop the tools and programs that are needed to meet the physical, mental, emotional and social needs of our veterans. We can continue the tradition, "To care for him who has borne the battle."*

*What our veterans earned, we deliver.*

*Patrick Russell, Member Save the VA Executive Committee*

*Save the VA* [http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/communities/hot-springs/save-the-va-grateful-for-congressional-support/article\\_eaadf58c-0d9e-11e2-b7d7-001a4bcf887a.html](http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/communities/hot-springs/save-the-va-grateful-for-congressional-support/article_eaadf58c-0d9e-11e2-b7d7-001a4bcf887a.html)

## **Delegations Request Meeting With VA Officials**

*Created: 10/3/2012 6:40:30 AM*

Congressional delegations in South Dakota as well as Wyoming and Nebraska have sent a letter to U.S. Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki to request a meeting in Hot Springs regarding the proposed changes to the Black Hills Health Care System.

The Senators and Representatives expressed "frustration and disappointment" in how proposed changes to the system have progressed.

It was sparked by a meeting last month between Veterans Affairs leadership and the Save the VA Committee where communications broke down.

The senators and representative want to hear directly from the members of the community, our veterans, and other stakeholders directly affected.

Stephen DiStasio, Director of the Black Hills Healthcare System says that everyone is after the same thing, the highest level of care, and thinks that a committee meeting with Senators and Representatives is a worthwhile objective.

<http://www.kotaradio.com/news.asp?eid=5002&ID=12224>

OURS

## **EDITORIAL: Letter to VA not enough**

October 07, 2012 8:30 am • By [Randall Rasmussen](#)

A federal veterans care facility has been located in Hot Springs for more than a century, but relations between the community and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs have deteriorated since the VA announced in December that it would close most of its facilities in Hot Springs.

Since then, Hot Springs has been trying to negotiate with the VA to keep at least some of the VA's facilities open. In June, the Save the VA committee presented an alternative plan to create a post-traumatic stress disorder treatment center and expand outpatient clinic services at the existing VA facilities. The proposal also includes education and job training for veterans, along with the PTSD treatment center at the VA's domiciliary, as a national demonstration project.

In addition, Save the VA suggested starting up a "Veterans Industries" company that would develop a product line, splitting proceeds between the VA to offset treatment costs and for community development projects in Hot Springs.

However, a Sept. 10 meeting between the committee and Black Hills Health Care System broke down when VA officials said they could not negotiate on its plan.

South Dakota's congressional delegation sent a letter to VA Secretary Eric Shinseki expressing disappointment in the breakdown in negotiations and stating that "trust has been lost, relationships damaged, and many fear that the actions of the BHHCS over the past ten months were all for show."

The letter was signed by South Dakota Sens. Tim Johnson and John Thune and Rep. Kristi Noem, Wyoming Sens. Mike Enzi and John Barrasso and Rep. Cynthia Lummis, and Nebraska Sen. Mike Hohanns and Rep. Adrian Smith. The senators and representatives are asking to meet with Shinseki to discuss the VA's plans and that the meeting take place in Hot Springs.

Throughout this process, Hot Springs officials, Save the VA members, veterans and members of Congress have complained that the VA has not been acting with full transparency and has not been willing to listen to area veterans and local citizens about their concerns about the VA's plans to pull out of Hot Springs.

The VA provided little documentation for its reorganization plan when it was announced. It was only because of public pressure that the VA did an economic analysis of its proposal, which, naturally, justified its plans as a cost savings.

The latest development strengthens the belief that the VA intends to follow through on its plan to abandon Hot Springs without regard to local concerns. Black Hills Health Care System director Steve DiStasio promised to study an alternative proposal by Save the VA, but now the VA won't even pretend to take it seriously.

It will take more than a strongly worded letter from members of Congress to shake the VA from its reorganization plan for Black Hills Health Care System. It seems obvious that the VA has been misleading local, state and congressional leaders and the Hot Springs community from the beginning. Congressional oversight may be the only option that remains.

[http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/opinion/editorial-letter-to-va-not-enough/article\\_a96eec26-bfae-5384-b2af-9884dcf29434.html](http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/opinion/editorial-letter-to-va-not-enough/article_a96eec26-bfae-5384-b2af-9884dcf29434.html)

## **'Save the VA' committee vows to continue its fight**

*Posted: Oct 08, 2012 6:04 PM MDT*

By Kristen Tripodi - [email](#)

Back in December The VA proposed closing the Hot Springs clinic to downsize the hospital; a move they say is in the best interest of patient quality and safety.

In response the 'Save the VA Committee' was quickly formed and began to fight the closure.

After a set back at a September meeting, 'Save the VA' members lost trust in the process, but they continue to fight.

"We're not going to roll over, we're not going to go away," said Patrick Russell, with 'Save the VA' Committee.

For Russell, a veteran himself, the fight to save the Hot Springs VA is far from over.

"We all want to do what's best for the veterans," said Russell.

Russell says the meeting in September between Black Hills Health Care officials and the 'Save the VA Committee broke down when the BHHCS said it was not in a position to negotiate.

"We felt like we were betrayed and what I would term as surface bargaining or bargaining in bad faith. they led us on to think that we were making progress, and they pulled the rug out from under us and said our proposals would not be given due consideration," said Russell.

The proposals the committee believes will not only save tax payers money, but create better care for veterans.

"We believe we have outlined a plan that's not only good for the community for veterans here, but we believe it's a model for veterans and rural communities nationwide," said Rich Gross, with the 'Save the VA' committee.

In response to the meeting, state leaders from South Dakota, Nebraska and Wyoming sent a letter to U.S. Secretary of Veterans affairs Eric Shinseki, to request a meeting in Hot Springs.

A meeting 'Save the VA' members hope will open the lines of communication they say they were denied.

"We want to start that dialogue and we want it to start with Secretary Shinseki when he's here," said Gross.

"We hope Secretary Shinseki will get here, see what's going on and see the passion that we have and really analyze what we think we have here as a model project, to make it better for veterans in the whole nation," said Don DeVries, Mayor of Hot Springs.

Regardless of if or when that meeting happens, the 'Save the VA' committee will be ready.

"The ball is in the VA's court. But we're not waiting, we're moving forward, we're going to be getting people organized and the day that Secretary Shinseki shows up he's going to see more than 1,000 people lining up to show their support for our VA," said Russell.

A call to Secretary Shinseki's office on Monday was not returned by news time.

'Save the VA' committee members are not sure when they'll receive a response and a possible meeting date with the secretary.

<http://www.kotatv.com/story/19768132/save-the-va-committee-vows-to-continue-its-fight>

## Future of Hot Springs hospital hot topic with veterans

By CHABELLA GUZMAN Staff Reporter | Posted: Wednesday, October 10, 2012 3:30 am

Congressman Adrian Smith listened to concerns from area veterans during a visit to the Western Nebraska Veterans Home in Scottsbluff on Tuesday.

Many of the issues that the audience brought up included the sequester of the military in the current federal budget. Recently, Democrat Norm Dicks, a member of the House Appropriations Committee, said that defense spending could be cut by an additional \$5 billion.

“What they (Congress) have put forward are unreasonable cuts,” Smith said. “They didn’t get the job done so we are left with it.”

He added that new ways of dealing with the cuts should be looked at.

Another topic of importance among the audience was the fate of the VA Medical Center in Hot Springs, S.D.

Scotts Bluff County Veterans Service Director John Brehm asked Smith what was going on with the center and when they would know more about its fate.

He noted that the VA Medical Center in Fort Meade, S.D., is advertising for staff when the Hot Springs center desperately needs staff and is not hiring.

Brehm asked if they were going to “strip down” the Hot Springs center before making the decision.

Several other members of the audience agreed that services they were able to get at the Hot Springs location were now no longer available.

Smith said he continues to work on the situation and is working with Congresswoman Kristi Noem.

It was brought up that some veterans would like to go to the Cheyenne, Wyo., VA Medical Center, but would be unable to, since they would have to change all their information over.

“Flexibility is what is needed from the centers for the veterans,” Smith said.

He added that for many, Hot Springs is closer than Cheyenne, but veterans should have the flexibility to use any facility where they could receive the best care and treatment.

## Delegation requests Hot Springs meeting with VA Secretary

October 08, 2012 11:45 pm • [By Curt Nettinga](#)

### *Save the VA committee grateful for action*

WASHINGTON, D.C. – South Dakota’s Congressional delegation - Senators Tim Johnson and John Thune, with Representative Kristi Noem - fired a strongly worded letter off to U.S. Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki, last Tuesday, expressing disappointment at the recent break down in discussions between the Save the VA Committee and officials from the Black Hills Health Care System and requesting a face-to-face meeting with Shinseki.

And the letter requests that the meeting take place in Hot Springs.

The delegation was joined by Senators Mike Enzi, Representative Cynthia Lummis and Senator John Barrasso of Wyoming as well as Nebraska Senator Mike Johanns and Representative Adrian Smith.

The Senators and Representatives expressed “frustration and disappointment” in how proposed changes to the BHHCS have progressed. The BHHCS gave its word that the process would be open, transparent, and inclusive. However, a Sept. 10 meeting between BHHCS officials and the Save the VA Committee broke down when the BHHCS said it was not in a position to negotiate on its proposal.

The letter continues that since that time, many stakeholders have lost trust in the process and fear that the actions of the BHHCS over the past ten months were all for show.

The Senators and Representatives wrote: “We remain committed to ensuring that our veterans receive the highest quality of care and believe that their voices and concerns need to be a part of any proposed changes. ... Given the recent developments as to how this process is moving forward, we are requesting a meeting with you, the tri-state congressional delegation and members of the Save the VA Committee in Hot Springs, SD. We believe that it is important you hear directly from the members of the community, our veterans, and other stakeholders directly affected.”

The full text of the letter can be found at [hotspringsstar.com](http://hotspringsstar.com).

The next day Pat Russell, member of the Executive Committee of the Save the Va Campaign, issued a press release on behalf of the group, thanking the Representatives and Senators for their action.

“On behalf of the Committee, I would like to thank the Congressional delegations...for submitting the letter to Secretary Shinseki asking for a meeting in Hot Springs,” Russell states in the press release.

“The Save the VA Committee has worked with the veterans from these states to craft solutions which incorporate access to care, quality of care and cost of care to meet the needs of our

nation's heroes; past, present and future. We look forward to having an open and honest discussion with the Congressional delegations and Secretary Shinseki to arrive at decisions that are in the best interests of all of our veterans; urban and rural.”

BHHCS Director Stephen DiStasio stated via e-mail that “It’s good to see the delegation requesting a meeting with Secretary Shinseki; it’s an expected request and in concert with the community’s desire.”

Hot Springs veteran Don Ackerman, who has been one of the leaders of the Save the VA Committee noted, “We have , from the start last September, operated openly and honestly to show and express our concerns with the BHHCS proposal to close Hot Springs.

“Stephen DiStasio has pushed a plan that does nothing to improve or enhance the health care of veterans in the Southern Black Hills. When we disproved every public statement he made, he finally just walked away (from the negotiations).”

No response had been issued by Shinseki’s office and no meeting in Hot Springs had been scheduled as the Hot Springs Star went to press on Monday morning.

In anticipation of a visit by the delegation and Sec. Shinsecki, a poster-making event is set for Oct. 13 at the American Legion, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

[http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/communities/hot-springs/delegation-requests-hot-springs-meeting-with-va-secretary/article\\_20819ff4-1161-11e2-afa4-0019bb2963f4.html](http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/communities/hot-springs/delegation-requests-hot-springs-meeting-with-va-secretary/article_20819ff4-1161-11e2-afa4-0019bb2963f4.html)

*Oct 12 2012*

## **Noem Weekly Column: Keeping the Commitment to Hot Springs**

By Rep. Kristi Noem

For over a century, the VA facility in Hot Springs has served our veterans. It is an historic facility that has a reputation for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and substance abuse treatment. Aside from the critical care it provides to the brave men and women who answered the call to serve, it also supports an entire community. But last December, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) turned the community upside down by proposing to essentially shutter operations at the facility.

The response by the veterans and members of the community has been inspiring. They banded together and demanded answers from the VA, but unfortunately, the VA's response has been lacking. From failing to initially provide a cost-benefit analysis to its most recent claim that it could not negotiate on the final proposal, the VA has been giving the Hot Springs community the runaround. Folks involved with the Save the VA Committee invested countless hours in crafting a counterproposal that they had been assured would be given serious consideration. Unfortunately, it appears the VA has gone back on its word.

The actions by the VA have deeply damaged its relationship with the Hot Springs community and has caused many to lose trust in its word. Like all South Dakotans, I want what's best for our veterans, and I believe that the proposal coming out of the community that serves so many of them deserves a proper hearing. That's why I sent a letter to VA Secretary Eric Shinseki requesting a meeting in Hot Springs. Senators Johnson and Thune, as well as representatives from Nebraska and Wyoming, joined me in this request and we hope to hear back from the Secretary soon with proposed times and dates. It is critically important that the Secretary hear the concerns of the larger community firsthand, just as I have, when considering what action to take.

I have visited Hot Springs twice this year to meet with the veterans and members of the community on this issue. Each time, I have been awed by their passion for the VA facility and the veterans it serves. This facility represents more than great veterans care and the heart of a rural economy, it represents a community identity that is as strong as it is proud.

The Hot Springs community represents the tenacity and commitment that defines so many South Dakotans, and I will not stop fighting to make sure Secretary Shinseki and the VA give this community, its counterproposal and our veterans the fair shake it deserves.

*Rep. Kristi Noem is South Dakota's lone U.S. Representative, elected in November 2010. She serves on the Agriculture, Education and Workforce and Natural Resources Committees.*

<http://noem.house.gov/index.cfm/2012/10/noem-weekly-column-keeping-the-commitment-to-hot-springs>

## Union echoes concerns regarding Hot Springs VA

October 15, 2012 10:14 am

### *AFGE decries bad-faith negotiations*

WASHINGTON, D.C. - The American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) last Thursday expressed grave concern over the Department of Veterans Affairs Black Hills Health Care System's (BHHCS) refusal to collaborate with veterans groups and other stakeholders as it moves forward with its plan to close the historic VA medical facility in Hot Springs.

On Sept. 10, negotiations with the Save the VA Committee on the future of the facility deteriorated as the VA decided to move forward with the closure, prompting members of Congress to demand a meeting in Hot Springs with VA Secretary Eric Shinseki. The Save the VA Committee, a community-based group fighting to keep the hospital open, has led the charge in enhancing the services of the hospital rather than closing its doors to veterans.

AFGE has supported the Save the VA Committee's efforts to provide the VA with an alternate proposal to keep the facility open to serve veterans in South Dakota and portions of Nebraska, North Dakota, Wyoming and Montana. For 10 months the committee has gathered the input of VA employees, veterans, community members and other stakeholders to develop an alternative solution to closing the doors of the Hot Spring VA Medical Center.

"It seems as though the agency has been stringing along the committee and the Hot Springs community just to keep up appearances," said AFGE National President J. David Cox.

Cox was a speaker at the VA march held last February.

"It is completely unacceptable that the VA has been unwilling to make any compromises with the community group as to the future of this facility."

The congressional delegation sent a letter to Secretary Shinseki Oct. 2, requesting to meet with him in Hot Springs over the agency's decision.

"Veterans have praised the care they've received at the Hot Springs VA facility and gave meaningful input into the committee's proposal to enhance the services delivered at this location. The idea of closing it down and ignoring the voices of our heroes is disgraceful. We urge the VA to return to the table with the committee to develop viable solutions that will address veterans' needs, instead of shutting down essential services at this historic facility," said Cox.

[http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/communities/hot-springs/union-echoes-concerns-regarding-hot-springs-va/article\\_60e90f46-16e3-11e2-968d-0019bb2963f4.html](http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/communities/hot-springs/union-echoes-concerns-regarding-hot-springs-va/article_60e90f46-16e3-11e2-968d-0019bb2963f4.html)

## In Our View

October 16, 2012 3:30 am

### Hard to argue with study

Recently, the National American Legion released its 2012 “System Worth Saving” report on Rural Health. The report is the product of a task force created at the national level of the American Legion, one of the largest veterans organizations in the nation, to annually conduct site visits of VA Medical Centers throughout the United States.

The Hot Springs VA facility was host to such a site visit in January this past year.

Among the recommendations made by the System Worth Saving Task Force after its Hot Springs VA visit was that the same level of health care and services should be maintained and that the domiciliary should be retained, to provide long-term and extended care for veterans.

Here is an excerpt from American Legion National Commander Fang Wong’s letter to his fellow Legionnaires, in the 2012 report:

“In our findings, we discovered that one out of three veterans enrolled in VA live in rural and highly rural areas. Of the 3.4 million rural veterans enrolled in VA, 2.2 million were treated in 2010. The number of rural and highly rural veterans is expected to increase.

Additionally, veterans living in rural areas face many challenges, including the lack of primary/specialty treatment available, difficulty recruiting and retaining VA health-care providers in rural and highly rural areas, and the increased time and distance veterans experience in traveling to VA health-care facilities.”

Commander Wong’s words come as no surprise to those served by the Hot Springs VA, or to those supporting the return of services removed over time. They echo the words spoken at nearly every town hall meeting held since the Black Hills Health Care System announced its plans to further limit and remove services in December of last year.

It would appear that those relying on the services offered - both locally and nationally - agree that rural health care for veterans is vital. We hope that someone with an open mind and no agenda is listening.

We close with the final paragraph from Commander Wong’s letter.

“We hope that our findings in this report will help Congress and VA understand what challenges our nation’s returning service members and veterans that live in rural communities face with accessing quality VA health care.”

*From the Editorial Staff of the Hot Springs Star, including Publisher Brett Nachtigall, Editor Curt Nettinga and Production Manager Sheryl Grimes.*

[http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/communities/hot-springs/in-our-view/article\\_5f570e76-16e8-11e2-8082-001a4bcf887a.html](http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/communities/hot-springs/in-our-view/article_5f570e76-16e8-11e2-8082-001a4bcf887a.html)

## How can we get through to you?

October 22, 2012 11:45 pm • [By Mary Anna Bails](#)

### *Guest Editorial*

Regarding: Proposed VA Closure in Hot Springs, SD

Dear Secretary Shinseki;

I don't know what to write. I know name calling will not receive a warm welcome and I know reason has no effect on the VA powers that be.

So what do I write this time that will get your attention?

Who am I? I grew up in Hot Springs. My Dad was a WWII veteran. He was part of the brand new Army Air Force and flew in the South Pacific. He died here at our VA Hospital.

My brother is a Viet Nam veteran and would have died this last winter, but for the dedicated staff at this hospital.

Do you want more?

My Mom worked for many years in Volunteer Services at this VA. I worked for a short time at this hospital and served as a volunteer. My family has been a part of the Veterans Affairs of Hot Springs for all of my life. We are proud that it was one of the outstanding facilities in the US. Its reputation is well earned for being caring for all Vets and their Families.

The facility is gorgeous with its landscaping, sitting here in the Southern Black Hills. Do you know that Hot Springs has the warmest weather in South Dakota? Compared to Rapid City with its constant harsh winds, it is truly a banana belt. Its stately, sound architecture is awesome and one of a kind in our great nation. The national cemetery on the grounds inspires its spiritual beauty. It is a unique National Memorial to past and present Veterans. It is a place of healing, both physical and spiritual.

So what is your problem?

My husband is a structural/mechanical designer. You cannot convince us that it is cost effective to build a new facility in Rapid City. This facility must be maintained whether you use it or not at a constant price tag of \$6 million per year. It seems you will not be content unless you close this Hospital and in the process destroy this City.

Is there anything I can do to attract your attention?

As my husband often says to me, "So, you want me to stand on my head and gargle peanut butter?" Someone or something stands to gain, but it's not the veterans and it certainly isn't this community.

Sincerely,

Mary Anna Bails

[http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/communities/hot-springs/how-can-we-get-through-to-you/article\\_f8d5e306-1c65-11e2-a3d9-0019bb2963f4.html](http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/communities/hot-springs/how-can-we-get-through-to-you/article_f8d5e306-1c65-11e2-a3d9-0019bb2963f4.html)

## Delegation 'strongly opposes' VA proposal

October 24, 2012 12:07 pm

WASHINGTON, D.C. – With a decision on the future of veteran’s health care in western South Dakota, eastern Wyoming and northwest Nebraska looming and no response to an earlier meeting request, the South Dakota Congressional delegation sent a second, strongly worded letter to Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki on Wednesday.

In the letter, which follows, the delegation states that they “strongly oppose the VA’s current proposal as presented,” and reiterate their request to meet with Sec. Shinseki and other stakeholders on the issue in Hot Springs prior to any decision being made on changes.

“We have received only vague reassurances from the VA to our questions on this matter,” the letter states. “When these partnerships are so central to the VA’s proposal, the simple assertion that the VA is having “ongoing conversations” with these parties is not enough to give us the confidence that this will be successfully implemented.”

[http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/communities/hot-springs/delegation-strongly-opposes-va-proposal/article\\_96be126e-1e05-11e2-a91f-0019bb2963f4.html](http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/communities/hot-springs/delegation-strongly-opposes-va-proposal/article_96be126e-1e05-11e2-a91f-0019bb2963f4.html)

## Congressional delegation opposes VA plan, seeks meeting with Secretary Shinseki



October 25, 2012 5:00 am • [Kevin Woster Journal staff](#)

South Dakota's congressional delegation officially announced Wednesday its opposition to a restructuring plan for the VA Health Care System of the Black Hills that would close most of the existing VA facilities in Hot Springs.

Sens. Tim Johnson and John Thune and Rep. Kristi Noem have questioned and complained about the restructuring plan since it was announced in December, but they stopped short of actually opposing it until Wednesday.

Announcing opposition now offers another opportunity to pressure U.S. Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki for a meeting about the issue in Hot Springs. The delegation's letter follows a similar request three weeks ago to Shinseki from congressional members from South Dakota, Wyoming and Nebraska.

Advocates of saving the aging VA facilities in Hot Springs said Wednesday they appreciated the latest effort from the delegation to get a response from Washington, D.C.

Rich Gross, a member of the Save the VA executive committee in Hot Springs, said he worries that the Nov. 6 election could further delay overdue answers from Shinseki's office. But he still hopes for a meeting and a chance to argue the case against closing the Hot Springs facilities directly to the VA secretary.

"We're still waiting for some positive statement from the secretary's office concerning a meeting, whether that means the delegation's invitation to come to Hot Springs, which we'd prefer, or includes an invitation for the delegation and us to go there," Gross said, referring to Washington, D.C.

It's long past time for answers from the VA, Gross said.

"The longer this goes on, the more unsettled things remain at the VA in Hot Springs among the employees, the more unsettled the community is," he said. "It's a community that needs to move forward, and we've been waiting almost a year."

Steve DiStasio, director of the VA Black Hills Health Care System, was part of a meeting on Oct. 10 with VA officials in Washington, D.C. He said Wednesday that Black Hills officials have reviewed comments and suggestions from critics of the plan and offered a recommendation that he wasn't prepared to discuss publicly.

"It is now in the secretary's office, and our role is to await a decision or further instructions," DiStasio said.

[http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/communities/hot-springs/congressional-delegation-opposes-va-plan-seeks-meeting-with-secretary-shinseki/article\\_c448bff6-fee4-51cf-9eb1-ef9410e25901.html](http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/communities/hot-springs/congressional-delegation-opposes-va-plan-seeks-meeting-with-secretary-shinseki/article_c448bff6-fee4-51cf-9eb1-ef9410e25901.html)