

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

October 2, 2012

The Honorable Eric Shinseki
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary Shinseki:

We write to express frustration and disappointment in how proposed changes to the Black Hills Health Care System (BHHCS) have progressed. We were hopeful that the BHHCS would keep its word about making this process open, transparent, and inclusive, as you assured us would be the case in your letter dated May 18, 2012. We were assured that public comment and feedback would be seriously considered and, as appropriate, be incorporated into any final proposal. It has come to our attention that at a September 10, 2012 meeting between the BHHCS Veterans Administration (VA) and the Save the VA Committee (the Committee), the meeting broke down when the BHHCS said it was not in a position to negotiate on its proposal. Whether this was a misstatement or fact, trust has been lost, relationships damaged, and many fear that the actions of the BHHCS over the past ten months were all for show.

When the BHHCS made the proposal public last December, stakeholders were led to believe that this was not a final proposal and input from the public would be given full and fair consideration. The Committee never intended its counterproposal to be an all-or-nothing alternative to the BHHCS proposal. They were led to believe, as were we, that the process moving forward would be collaborative. Recently, BHHCS sent its original proposal and all other proposals received to the VA Central Office (VACO) for review.

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. Several Veteran Service Organizations, tribal governments and the State of South Dakota have issued resolutions expressing serious concerns with the BHHCS proposal as written and concerns have also been raised by some veterans and organizations in Nebraska and Wyoming. Concerns such as the extent to which major components of the BHHCS plan have been vetted with private health care providers and facilities, how the BHHCS proposal can effectively provide care to veterans in areas already declared "medically underserved" or with Critical Access Hospital designation, and concerns expressed by Native veterans relative to the Indian Health Service need to be considered. We are worried that these concerns may not have been addressed in the

BHHCS proposal submitted to the VACO. These concerns are addressed in the Committee's counterproposal.

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. We ask that this meeting take place as soon as possible and any action on this proposal be delayed until a meeting can take place. Finally, we ask for transparency as to how proposals are evaluated and what criteria are used to make any final decision.

We appreciate your attention to this issue and your timely response.

Sincerely,



TIM JOHNSON
United States Senator

JOHN THUNE
United States Senator

KRISTI NOEM
Member of Congress



MIKE ENZI
United States Senator

JOHN BARRASSO
United States Senator

CYNTHIA LUMMIS
Member of Congress



MIKE JOHANNNS
United States Senator

ADRIAN SMITH
Member of Congress

Enclosure: May 18, 2012 Letter to South Dakota Delegation from Secretary Shinseki



**THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON
May 18, 2012**

The Honorable Kristi Noem
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congresswoman Noem:

Thank you for your cosigned letter regarding the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) proposal to improve Veterans' health care services in the VA Black Hills Health Care System (BHHCS). As you indicate, VA strives to be responsive in our outreach to Veterans, employees, local communities, Members of Congress, and other stakeholders regarding the important dialogue on how, when, and where to deliver better, safer, and more accessible health care to Veterans living in the BHHCS service area.

VA has been pleased with the level of interest from stakeholders. We have received and processed at least 29 Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. In addition to your request on behalf of the Hot Springs community, the Department of South Dakota Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States and Disabled American Veterans Department of South Dakota also requested that VA extend the deadline.

As an accommodation to all stakeholders and interested parties, the comment period has been extended through June 30, 2012. This final extension should provide adequate time for community groups to complete any needed additional work. All comments on the reconfiguration proposal by Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) 23 and submission of any alternate proposals are due by that date.

VISN 23 and VA will review and consider all comments and alternate proposals. VA will work with stakeholder groups and others who have submitted proposals to ensure we fully understand them, seeking clarification if needed, and providing assistance and additional information if requested. By July 31, 2012, BHHCS and VISN 23 will submit a final reconfiguration recommendation for review. Their recommendation will include consideration of viable suggestions and/or alternatives received from stakeholders that are consistent with VA's mission and address VA's goals of increased access for all Veterans served by BHHCS, as well as sustainment of high quality, safe care, and cost effectiveness.

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The Honorable Kristi Noem

You also requested my assurance that no final decision has been made to close the Hot Springs facility and that any and all "counter-proposals" will be carefully reviewed for consideration. I assure you that no final decision has been made regarding the future of VA BHHCS. VA is committed to the open, transparent, and inclusive process that we have initiated to assist with this very important decision.

Although the ways in which we provide care may change in the future as we seek to create new partnerships, VA is firmly committed to providing access to high quality, safe care to Veterans in South Dakota, northeastern Nebraska, and eastern Wyoming.

If you have further questions, please contact Mr. Tim Embree, Congressional Relations Officer at (202) 461-5552, or Timothy.Embree@va.gov. A similar letter has been sent to the cosigners of your letter.

I appreciate your continued support of our mission.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Eric K. Shinseki". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "E".

Eric K. Shinseki