

June 24, 2016

Ms. Janet Murphy
Network Director
VA Midwest Health Care Network (VISN 23)
2805 Dodd Road, Suite 250
Eagan, MN 55121

Dear Director Murphy,

I write to express my concern over the continual downsizing and staff reductions at the Hot Springs Campus of the VA Black Hills Health Care System. Specifically, since 2012, I note 33 key clinical positions have either been transferred or eliminated at the Hot Springs campus. These staff reductions have dramatically reduced care and services to veterans, placed undue burden and stress on remaining staff and potentially add risk for veterans.

In 2012 the Hot Springs Campus was staffed with three medical doctors, two physician assistants and one nurse practitioner working in primary care. Today only one physician assistant remains to meet the needs of veterans in primary care. Of eight pharmacists on staff in 2012, only two positions remain. Of six respiratory therapists on staff in 2012, only three positions remain. The respiratory therapist shortage recently resulted in patients being informed on June 10 via a sign on the door that the Respiratory Therapy Clinic was "closed due to lack of staff." I also note the further staff reductions of psychiatrists, surgical physicians, nurse practitioners, X-ray technicians, lab technicians, registered nurses and licensed practical nurses.

Given the final Hot Springs Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) has not been released and that no formal decision has been made by the VA regarding the realignment of services in the Black Hills Health Care System, these deliberate staff reductions are deeply concerning. Additionally, current law has suspended any realignment in Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) 23 for the last three years. This provision remains in effect until the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) transmits to Congress a comprehensive national realignment strategy of health care services. To date, I am unaware of Congress receiving such a report.

Under these circumstances, I respectfully ask the following questions:

1. Why has the Hot Springs Campus undergone such dramatic downsizing over the last four years?

2. How does the VA interpret the law to allow for the elimination of these services at the Hot Springs Campus?

I thank you for your hard work and commitment to serving our veterans. I share your goal of improving access and quality of care for all of our nation's heroes and look forward to hearing back from you on this important matter. I would very much appreciate a response not later than July 27th, 2016.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "M. Michael Rounds". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "M." and the last name "Rounds" being the most prominent parts.

M. Michael Rounds
United States Senator