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July 24, 2012

Michael W. Fisher
Acting Network Director
Veterans Affairs Northwest Health Network (VISN 20)
1601 E. 4th Plain Blvd, Building 17, Suite C402
Vancouver, WA 98661

Dear Director Fisher:

Thank you for your dedication to supporting our nation's veterans. It has been brought to my attention that the Mobile Medical Unit (MMU) designed to serve veterans living in rural areas of Washington state has been largely unused since it was provided in 2009. I write seeking clarity as to how this occurred, with the goal of maximizing this taxpayer-funded resource to the benefit of our veteran community.

As you are aware, approximately two out of every five veterans live in areas deemed highly rural and remote by VA's own population standards. Traveling to the Vancouver Campus of the Portland Veterans Administration (VA) Medical Center or the South Sound Community Based Outpatient Center to receive care and services is a time-consuming, costly and often physically exhausting undertaking – especially for disabled and elderly veterans. Some must undertake a 150-mile roundtrip to reach the nearest VA medical facility. Many rural veterans could benefit from the MMU visits and access to convenient, predictable health services.

After inquiring about the MMU with the Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs, and more recently with the Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) 20 headquarters, my office learned that after the first year and a half of service, the MMU mostly sat idle in the American Lake Division parking lot until May of this year.

We were told this had happened largely due to inadequate staffing levels. I would like to better understand how the VA planning process was unable to anticipate such challenges. Once the federal investment was made in the MMU, what was the original staffing plan for the unit? Were staffing challenges anticipated, and were contingency plans made? What plans are in place to prevent a shortage of staff that results in the MMU remaining underutilized going forward?

While I was glad to learn that the Washington State MMU very recently resumed service during the first week of every month, will you please explain why the MMU cannot be utilized the other three weeks?

Men and women who have served our country in the military deserve access to consistent, timely, quality health care when they return from duty. I applaud the VA's intentions to bring health care out to hard-to-reach communities. However, when my office hears from veterans about how difficult

it is to access care while this taxpayer-funded unit has sat virtually unused for years on end, important questions must be answered.

Thank you for your attention to this important issue that affects rural veterans in Southwest Washington. I look forward to hearing from you. Please know that I am ready to work with you to solve this challenge.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jaime Herrera Beutler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J".

Jaime Herrera Beutler
Member of Congress