

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

April 10, 2020

The Honorable Michael J. Missal
Inspector General
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Inspector General Missal:

The unacceptable health crisis at the New Jersey Veterans Home at Paramus, New Jersey (NJVHP) is threatening the lives of veterans who have bravely served our nation and are some of our most vulnerable residents. We respectfully request an immediate federal investigation into this facility, and the conditions that have resulted in the deaths of ten veterans and 23 residents testing positive for COVID-19.¹ According to published reports, the rate of infection among and staff members, residents, and deaths caused by the virus could be even higher.²

The New Jersey Veterans Home at Paramus is owned, managed, and operated by the New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (NJ DMVA), and inspected and licensed by the New Jersey Department of Health and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) jointly. As you know, VA State Homes receive a per diem for eligible veterans who are referred there. As a result, the facility must comply with federal VA requirements for care.

The reports about the leadership and the conditions at the NJVHP is unsatisfactory. Even prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, the facility received a two star, or “below average” rating from the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) in the category of health inspection, indicating greater health risks.³

We believe that conditions at State Veterans Homes like the NJVHP merit scrutiny because of the many reports of veteran deaths and infections at other veterans’ homes in the state and across the country. For instance, following reports of more than 15 veteran deaths and a high COVID-19

¹ NJDMVA, COVID-19 Report #18, April 9, 2020

² NorthJersey.com, “Paramus veterans home in crisis mode: 37 people dead in 2 weeks, National Guard deployed,” Lindy Washburn, April 8, 2020, <https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/coronavirus/2020/04/08/nj-coronavirus-outbreak-paramus-veterans-home-kills-least-10/2971899001/>; ABC7NY, “Coronavirus News: Combat medics arrive to care for residents of Paramus Veterans Memorial Home,” April 9, 2020, <https://abc7ny.com/veterans-home-residents-dead-paramus-in-new-jersey/6088338/>; USA Today, “Coronavirus deaths are rising at Virginia, New Jersey nursing homes: At least 43 residents have died since mid-March,” Doug Stanglin, April 8, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/04/08/coronavirus-death-toll-virginia-nursing-home-soar-33/2971642001/>

³<https://www.medicare.gov/nursinghomecompare/profile.html#profTab=1&ID=315346&Distn=0.4&loc=07652&lat=40.9541697&lng=-74.0652616>

infection rate at the Soldiers' Home and Chelsea Soldiers' Home in Holyoke, Massachusetts, the VA was required to provide public health assistance to two nursing homes.

Therefore, we respectfully request that an investigation answer the following questions:

- 1) How many veterans and other residents at the NJVHP have been exposed to the COVID-19?
- 2) Please explain how this facility passed its most recent inspection by the VA.
- 3) When did VA officials become aware of an outbreak of COVID-19 infections at the NJVHP?
- 4) When were officials at the NJ DMVA made aware of staffing shortages at the facility?
- 5) When were relatives of NJVHP residents made aware of the outbreak of COVID-19 at the facility?
- 6) Please detail what policies the VA has in place to protect veterans and others from the virus. Please outline if such policies were followed.
- 7) Did employees report concerns with the conditions at the facility? If so, please detail those concerns.
- 8) With at least 17 employees at NJVHP testing positive for COVID-19, are the remaining employees being provided with the equipment they need to protect themselves from being sickened by COVID-19 or spreading COVID-19 to residents and their coworkers?

A complete review should also detail the steps the VA is taking in response to the COVID-19 outbreak in the community. Additionally, it should include how VA hospitals and homes are providing care to veterans diagnosed with COVID-19 to prevent our New Jersey health care system from becoming overwhelmed during this pandemic. It should also cover the VA's actions to contain the spread of COVID-19, including whether the VA has provided additional personal protective equipment (PPE) to staff, tested each resident and staff member at NJVHP, deployed additional health care providers and staff from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to treat and care for sick veterans, and transferred NJVHP residents to other VA medical facilities for treatment, and transferred residents who have tested negative for COVID-19 to VA Community Living Centers or other assisted living facilities in New Jersey to reduce their risk of exposure.

Thank you very much for your service and your immediate attention to this critical matter to the health and wellbeing of New Jersey's veterans. Please do not hesitate to contact our offices should you require additional information.

Sincerely,



Josh Gottheimer
Member of Congress



Bill Pascrell, Jr.
Member of Congress

Cc: Sen. Vin Gopal, Chair, New Jersey Senate Military and Veterans' Affairs Committee

Asm. Cleopatra G. Tucker, Chair, New Jersey Assembly Military and Veterans' Affairs Committee

Dr. Mark A. Pitera, Deputy Commissioner for Veterans Affairs, NJ Department of Military & Veterans Affairs