

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

April 10, 2020

The Honorable Robert Wilkie
Secretary
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We are deeply disturbed and angry about the threat to the health and well-being of the veteran residents in the New Jersey Veterans Home at Paramus (NJVHP). As we write to you, according to published reports, 37 veterans have died in two weeks, 70 veterans are ill, and 17 staff tested positive for novel coronavirus (COVID-19).¹ We believe that immediate actions must be taken to limit the spread of COVID-19 and prevent more veterans at the facility from becoming ill or dying.

Today, we are requesting that the VA Inspector General conduct an independent investigation and issue a report on the conditions at the facility and status of veteran residents at the NJVHP. Pending the outcome and recommendations of that investigation, we urge you to coordinate with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the National Guard deployed to NJVHP to take swift actions to contain the spread of COVID-19, including providing additional personal protective equipment (PPE) to staff, testing each resident and staff member at NJVHP, sending more health care providers and staff from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to treat and care for sick veterans, and consider transferring NJVHP residents to other VA medical facilities for treatment, or transferring 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.

Following the reports of over 15 veteran deaths and a high COVID-19 infection rate at the Soldiers' Home and Chelsea Soldiers' Home in Holyoke, Massachusetts, the VA provided public health assistance to two nursing homes. We urge you to take the same actions in New Jersey to assist NJVHP residents as they are particularly vulnerable to severe illness and death from COVID-19. The National Guard combat medics and staff at NJVHP need the expertise and specialty care from VA providers to treat the veteran residents and prevent further spread of COVID-19. We also appreciate the VA Medical Center in East Orange, New Jersey making intensive care units (ICU)

¹NorthJersey.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/>

and acute care beds available to non-veteran patients in response to the COVID-19 outbreak in the community and the VA providers providing care to veterans and patients diagnosed with COVID-19 to prevent our New Jersey health care system from becoming overwhelmed during this pandemic.

We are fully aware of the severe shortage of medical supply and personal protective equipment in New Jersey and across the country, including at VA facilities. We nonetheless implore you to work with the White House Coronavirus Task Force to swiftly obtain more medical supplies, personal protective equipment, and resources for the providers and staff at VA medical facilities and New Jersey veterans homes including NJVHP. Given that at least 17 employees at NJVHP tested positive for COVID-19 according to the New Jersey Department of Health, we believe that the remaining employees must have the equipment they need to protect themselves from being sickened by COVID-19 or spreading COVID-19 to residents, and their coworkers.

Thank you very much for your immediate attention. Please let us know if there is anything else our offices can provide.

Sincerely,



Josh Gottheimer
Member of Congress



Bill Pascrell, Jr.
Member of Congress