

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

April 28, 2020

The Honorable Robert Wilkie
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave., NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary Wilkie:

Thank you for your ongoing efforts to protect the health and welfare of Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) employees and the veterans they serve during the COVID-19 pandemic. We write to urge continuing prioritization of additional testing kits and personal protective equipment (PPE) at the VA Maine Healthcare System and across the entire Veterans Health Administration. The VA faces particular risks to its patient population, as veterans who use the VA health care system are often older and less healthy than veterans who do not, and VA operates over 100 Community Living Centers, which like other nursing homes are especially vulnerable. Similarly, Maine is the oldest state in the nation by median age.

The staff and leadership at Togus in Maine are committed to serving their patients during this crisis, fulfilling their mission to care for our veterans with skill, compassion, readiness, and perseverance. However, like many hospitals in Maine, there is an ongoing shortage of COVID-19 testing capabilities and adequate PPE.

The VA has demonstrated ingenuity in addressing COVID-19 testing capacity, such as the development of in-house testing capabilities at some VA facilities which has been utilized by VA Maine to turn around some test results in 12 to 24 hours, yet testing capacity is still lacking. Rapid and widespread testing is essential because it allows VA to more quickly allocate resources towards the most urgent needs, as well as to develop an understanding of baseline levels of the virus. As you acquire and distribute more testing capability, we urge you to prioritize tests that provide extremely rapid results, in a matter of minutes or hours rather than days or weeks, and ensure that such tests are distributed to VA Maine and other VA facilities in need.

Like other VA facilities, Togus has also been forced to enact extended use policies on N95 masks, generally using one per day unless a particular staff member encounters high-risk exposures. Although PPE supplies are not at emergency levels, these policies are not ideal and additional PPE is needed to protect VA employees, veterans, and their families.

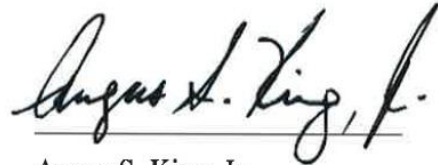
We respectfully request that you provide us with an update on actions taken by VA in regard to prioritization of additional testing kits and PPE. We stand ready in Congress to support VA in its efforts to expand the availability of COVID-19 rapid testing kits and PPE to its employees and veterans.

Again, thank you for your work supporting Maine veterans and veterans throughout our great nation.

Sincerely,



Susan M. Collins
United States Senator



Angus S. King, Jr.
United States Senator



Chellie Pingree
Member of Congress



Jared Golden
Member of Congress