

LISA MURKOWSKI
ALASKA

COMMITTEES:
ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES
RANKING MEMBER

APPROPRIATIONS

HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR,
AND PENSIONS

INDIAN AFFAIRS

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-0203
(202) 224-6665
(202) 224-5301 FAX

510 L STREET, SUITE 600
ANCHORAGE, AK 99501-1956
(907) 271-3735

101 12TH AVENUE, ROOM 329
FAIRBANKS, AK 99701-6278
(907) 456-0233

800 GLACIER AVENUE, SUITE 101
JUNEAU, AK 99801
(907) 586-7277

805 FRONTAGE ROAD, SUITE 105
KENAI, AK 99611-9104
(907) 283-5808

4079 TONGASS AVENUE, SUITE 204
KETCHIKAN, AK 99901-5526
(907) 225-6880

851 EAST WESTPOINT DRIVE, SUITE 307
WASILLA, AK 99654-7142
(907) 376-7665

November 9, 2012

The President
The White House
Washington, DC 20500

Mr. President:

When you took office the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) had a lot of improving to do, particularly when it came to serving veterans in rural and remote areas. Alaska is home to more veterans per capita than any other state in the nation. But the farther a veteran lives from Anchorage, the more he or she is cut off from his or her earned veterans benefits. In remote, roadless Alaska - home to veterans of Aleut, Indian and Eskimo descent - there was hardly a reason for a veteran to register with the VA because the veteran might have to travel more than 600 miles on two aircraft at his own expense to get to the nearest VA facility. And even those veterans in Anchorage were far too often put on an airplane to Seattle for care.

All of this is beginning to change for the better, largely due to the leadership of General Eric Shinseki, perhaps the wisest of all your cabinet choices. Before General Shinseki's confirmation, I explained to him the difficulty of getting his predecessors to take leadership in improving services for Alaska's veterans. None were willing to challenge the VA's culture that empowered local managers to say "No, we don't do it that way." General Shinseki was a breath of fresh air. He agreed to take ownership of the problems I put in his lap. Even though change did not occur overnight, General Shinseki has delivered on his commitments.

Under Secretary Shinseki's leadership the VA has for the first time entered into agreements with components of Alaska's tribal healthcare delivery system to provide care to Alaska veterans in rural areas through tribal facilities near their homes. My predecessor, Senator Stevens, and I encouraged the VA to take this step in annual appropriations bills, and I held hearings in 2007 about the lack of VA services available to rural Alaska veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, but none of Secretary Shinseki's predecessors took the bull by the horns to solve the problem as Secretary Shinseki has.

Another perplexing problem has been forcing Alaska veterans to travel to VA facilities in the Lower 48 for care that was available from community hospitals and providers in Alaska. At one time about 600 Alaska veterans were asked to fly across time zones if they wanted the VA to pay for a particular consult or procedure. Secretary Shinseki concluded this was unconscionable, and since 2010 the number of veterans asked to travel "Outside" has been consistently dropping because the Alaska VA Healthcare System has been provided sufficient resources to purchase healthcare at home.

For these reasons I urge you do all in your power to keep him working for our veterans over the next four years. The VA still faces considerable challenges in improving the turnaround time for claims processing, although the Anchorage VA office has significantly improved under the management that Secretary Shinseki's team has installed there. And there is room for much more innovation like creating "Virtual Vet Centers" using secure Internet teleconferencing technology so rural veterans can access readjustment counseling services that are readily available to veterans in the larger cities.

When General Shinseki traveled to Alaska for his first visit as VA Secretary in May 2011 I was skeptical that he would have the will or the ability to overcome the bureaucratic inertia that made some Alaska veterans feel like second, third or fourth class citizens. I am pleased to report that Secretary Shinseki has proven me wrong. One of the best gifts that you can give to America's veterans this Veterans Day is the commitment that Eric Shinseki will remain on the job in the new administration to continue the real progress he has made. Let me know if there's anything more I can do to help make this happen.

Thank you for your attention to this request. Should you have any questions, please have your staff contact Nathan Bergerbest of my staff at 202-224-2839.

Sincerely,



Lisa Murkowski
United States Senator