



Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

August 21, 2019

PLEASE RESPOND TO:

- ☐ 2134 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-3704
(202) 225-6416
- ☐ 405 EAST 8TH AVENUE, #2030
EUGENE, OR 97401
(541) 465-6732
1-800-944-9603
- ☐ 125 CENTRAL AVENUE, #350
COOS BAY, OR 97420
(541) 269-2609
- ☐ 612 SE JACKSON STREET, #9
ROSEBURG, OR 97470
(541) 440-3523
- ☐ defazio.house.gov

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

Dear Secretary Wilkie:

I write to express my serious concerns with the Roseburg VA Health Care System's (RVAHCS) persistent recruitment and retention issues and urge you to work closely with RVAHCS and VISN 20 to help alleviate these issues.

As you may recall, I sent a June 24 letter urging the VA to use pay flexibilities to address recruitment and retention issues of VA General Schedule (GS) employees. In a July 23 response letter, you detailed a number of pay flexibilities already being utilized to attract and retain qualified candidates, including recruitment and relocation incentives, retention incentives, student loan repayment program benefits, education debt reduction program access, appointments above the minimum rate of the Grade, and Special Salary Rates.

Despite the use of these flexibilities, you wrote that "RVAHCS facilities in Lane and Douglas counties continue to be difficult labor markets for our health care organizations to recruit and retain qualified staff." Unfortunately, this statement is all too true, and I am concerned that these persistent difficulties are forcing RVAHCS to rush into decisions that could be detrimental to our Southwest Oregon veteran community.

In fact, recent staff shortages within RVAHCS forced the abrupt closure of the Roseburg Emergency Department (ED) and conversion to an Urgent Care (UC) facility. According to RVAHCS Director Keith Allen, VISN 20 senior leadership directed RVAHCS to implement a conversion from an ED to a UC facility as a result of "shortfalls in qualified providers to staff Emergency Department ancillary services, such as laboratory services, radiology services and respiratory services." Moving forward, the UC will only operate Monday through Friday as staffing shortages prevent the UC from operating seven days a week.

Meanwhile, Roseburg, Oregon, veterans currently have no community care UC facility in Roseburg, and they are understandably concerned about accessing immediate medical care after 8pm and on weekends.

Without appropriate VA Central Office intervention, I am concerned that RVAHCS will continue to suffer from recruiting and retention issues, which will ultimately lead to degraded care for veterans. Neglecting or abandoning Southwest Oregon's veterans is not an option.

Instead, I request that you work closely with RVAHCS and VISN 20 to address these ongoing issues.

First and foremost, it is critical that VA press TriWest Health Alliance to establish a community care contract with a seven-day-a-week Urgent Care facility located in Roseburg. Currently, TriWest has only contracted with one UC facility in Canyonville, Oregon, which is thirty minutes away from Roseburg and limited to five days a week. Community care facilities in Eugene, Springfield, Lebanon, and Brookings are all open six or seven days a week, and Roseburg-area veterans should be able to expect the same level of community care.

Secondly, the VA Central Office must continue to be an adept and willing partner to help RVAHCS and VISN 20 maximize all pay flexibilities, including Special Salary Rates. In your July 23 letter, you detailed that there is currently a "Special Salary Rate table pending approval, with more occupational series under consideration." It is critical that VA expedite review of all Special Salary Rates and occupational series under consideration and ensure that RVAHCS is taking full advantage of all pay flexibilities to recruit top-tier candidates.

Lastly, I urge you to work closely with the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to address locality pay concerns in Douglas and Lane Counties. I have written separately to OPM asking them to work with the Federal Salary Council (FSC) to ensure proper consideration is given to either including Douglas and Lane Counties within the Portland-Vancouver-Salem, OR-WA locality pay area or establishing a unique locality pay designation area for these counties. As OPM considers this request, I believe it is essential that the VA share its persistent recruitment and retention issues in Douglas and Lane Counties with OPM. They should hear directly from the VA about the fact that multiple candidates declined RVAHCS employment offers between 2017 and 2019 because the salary and benefit packages did not cover the higher cost of living and housing shortages in these counties. Thorough reevaluation and increases for Douglas and Lane Counties would go a long way towards addressing recruitment and retention issues that have consistently plagued RVAHCS.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this issue and your commitment to ensuring that Oregon's veterans receive the best care possible.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Peter A. DeFazio', is positioned above the printed name.

Peter A. DeFazio
Member of Congress

CC: Michael Murphy
Network Director, VISN 20

Keith Allen
Director, RVAHCS