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COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS

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WASHINGTON, DC 20515

<http://veterans.house.gov>

August 2, 2024

The Honorable Denis McDonough
 Secretary
 U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
 810 Vermont Avenue, NW
 Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough:

As you know, congressional offices play an important role in ensuring veterans receive the benefits and care they have earned. As the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) continues to implement the *Honoring Our PACT Act of 2022*, Public Law 117-168, this need is becoming even greater. Historically, VA has welcomed this cooperation, and invited congressional offices to use space in their facilities. For example, a bipartisan group of Congressmen had access to office space at the West Palm Beach VA Medical Center. These office spaces allowed congressional offices to help veteran constituents navigate VA's bureaucracy. This arrangement was very popular with veteran constituents, however, in 2019, the Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) 8 Director formally evicted Representative Mast and two other Members of Congress from holding office hours at the VA medical center.

In a rejection letter, the VISN 8 Director explained that the space was no longer available because VA's Office of General Counsel (OGC) "opined VA Medical Centers and clinics should only be used for clinical purposes."¹ We appreciate that VA facilities must primarily be used for medical care and services, but as you know, medical centers are constantly used for other purposes. In March 2024, our staff witnessed duplicative space used for non-medical purposes, including multiple adjacent marketplaces; the space which we used to meet with veteran constituents to ensure they are receiving the level of service they have earned is now being used to store janitorial supplies. Recent reports allege that VA is even planning to use VA facilities to assist with the Biden-Harris administration's voter registration efforts. We trust you would agree with us that given that, the arguments against congressional office hours appear at best, disingenuous. Especially when the veterans in Florida have been satisfied and appreciative of having this easy access to their representative should they need casework assistance.

Although VA should preemptively make these spaces available in all VA Medical Centers, we are prepared to compel this action. Representative Mast's *Improving Veterans*

¹ VA VISN 8 letter, from VISN 8 Network Director to Representative Brian Mast, January 12, 2023.

Access to Congressional Services Act of 2023, H.R.562, would do just that, requiring VA to permit a Member of Congress to use their facilities to meet with constituents.

We ask that VA provide answers to the below questions as soon as possible and not later than **August 31, 2024**.

1. Please provide all documentation, including any written opinions, related to West Palm Beach VA Medical Center's decision to evict congressional offices from West Palm Beach VA Medical Center.
2. Please list all non-clinical spaces within the West Palm Beach VA Medical Center.
3. Please explain how West Palm Beach VA Medical Center has multiple adjacent marketplaces if VA Medical Centers "should only be used for clinical purposes."
4. Please provide a list of any VA facilities which offer space for Members of Congress to meet with their constituents.

Mr. Secretary, we are confident that you agree that veterans should have access to congressional services and assistance when facing obstacles with VA's bureaucracy. Our nation's veterans deserve the highest quality healthcare, and we are hopeful that you will respond promptly to this letter so that we can work together to ensure this. Thank you for your attention to this important issue. Please do not hesitate to have your staff contact our staff with any questions.

Sincerely,



MIKE BOST
Chairman
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs



BRIAN MAST
Member of Congress