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## United States Senate

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January 7, 2016

The Honorable Robert A. McDonald  
Secretary  
Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Ave NW  
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonald:

I write to request the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) consider Colorado's San Luis Valley for a pilot program to strengthen the delivery of community and behavioral health care to rural veterans. The San Luis Valley's rural location and its strong community commitment to veterans make it the ideal place to try new approaches to providing improved access to care.

Home to almost 5,000 veterans, the San Luis Valley is located in a highly rural part of Colorado. Veterans living in the San Luis Valley have access to VA care through the local Community Based Outpatient Care (CBOC) in Alamosa. However, VA and non-VA providers alike in the San Luis Valley have experienced immense difficulties recruiting and retaining medical professionals, including in the area of behavioral health. In particular, the Alamosa CBOC has struggled to realize the staffing necessary to meet the area need and to fill its only full time primary care physician position. Just last week, the clinic announced the position is once again open, after being filled for only three months.

San Luis Valley veterans who are ineligible to receive care at non-VA facilities must travel between 242 and 466 miles roundtrip to the next nearest VA medical facility in Pueblo, Colorado Springs, or Denver. In order to reach each of these cities, veterans must drive through La Veta pass, a mountain pass that can become dangerous in inclement weather. Additionally, the San Luis Valley has some of the lowest wages and highest unemployment rates in the Colorado and making the long trip financially burdensome for some veterans who live there. When faced with these barriers, many veterans decide to simply give up, or forgo certain treatments.

As such, access to non-VA health care in their communities is critically important for San Luis Valley veterans and the community stands ready and organized in support of this goal. The Veterans Coalition of the San Luis Valley includes local veterans, County Commissioners, veteran service officers, and others who are dedicated to improving services for area veterans. The Veterans Coalition works regularly with local health care providers who have expressed a consistent willingness and interest in helping local veterans achieve better access to health and behavioral health services.

Whether it is to support hiring at the local VA clinic, working to expand non-VA fee-based services, or participating in the VA's PC3 and Choice programs, the San Luis Valley community has repeatedly committed to working with the VA to find a solution for area veterans. San Luis Valley veterans have been patient as we work through various programs and partial solutions. It is past time to come to a long term solution for San Luis Valley veterans that enables them to meet the majority of their health and behavioral health care needs without having to make a lengthy and expensive trip to another part of the state.

I understand the VA is currently working towards a plan to streamline and improve delivery of non-VA care to veterans. It is my hope that you will consider the San Luis Valley for a pilot program to improve and increase access to non-VA care for veterans in the community. The San Luis Valley community stands ready to work with the VA to expand community care and produce a working model that can be successfully implemented in other similar parts of the country.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Michael F. Bennet". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent horizontal stroke at the end.

Michael F. Bennet