

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 17, 2014

The Honorable Sloan D. Gibson
Acting Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave. N.W.
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Acting Secretary Sloan D. Gibson,

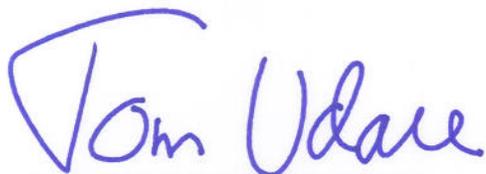
Thank you for planning a visit to the New Mexico Veterans Affairs Medical Center (NMVAMC) on Thursday, July 17, 2014. We are writing to call your attention to an issue that you may learn more about when you visit our state: the need to immediately hire a qualified permanent director for NMVAMC. We know the VA nationwide is facing a time of great challenges and that you are working hard to overcome them. However, it has been more than six months since the announcement of the former New Mexico Director George Marnell's retirement. In January, we were assured by Dr. Robert Petzel—then VA Undersecretary for Health—that the Department of Veterans Affairs was planning to fill the position by May of this year. We fear this continued delay in new leadership is adding to the already serious concerns among veterans about the VA system in New Mexico.

There are several challenges unique to rural and medically underserved states like New Mexico that require the attention of a permanent director at NMVAMC. Veterans in our state face transportation challenges as well as a shortage of doctors and other medical professionals to serve their needs. We also have a diverse group of veterans, including the Native American, Hispanic, female, and growing elderly veterans population in New Mexico. NMVAMC needs a permanent director with extensive health care management experience, a deep understanding of rural communities, and an ability to communicate effectively to a diverse population. Therefore, it is imperative that the next director work with our veterans and be open and responsive to directly addressing their needs and the needs of their families.

We continue to support the VA and Office of Inspector General investigations relating to adequate and timely access to care at VA hospitals and clinics across the country. As you know, New Mexico's VAMC is one of several cited by the OIG's interim report as having management and scheduling issues. As these investigations are conducted and the appropriate solutions are put in place, NMVAMC will need a strong, permanent director to work to regain the trust of the veterans the VA serves in New Mexico. In order to resolve the crisis in New Mexico's VA health care system and begin to restore trust in the system, this new director must also lead effective and proactive outreach efforts within our communities.

Thank you for your attention to this matter of great importance to New Mexico veterans and their families.

Sincerely,



Tom Udall
United States Senator



Martin Heinrich
United States Senator