June 10, 2013

The Honorable Harry Reid
Senate Majority Leader
S-221 Capitol Building
Washington, D.C. 20510-7020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Senate Minority Leader
S-230 Capitol Building
Washington, D.C. 20510-7010

The Honorable John A. Boehner
Speaker of the House
H-232 Capitol Building
Washington, D.C. 20515-6501

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
House Minority Leader
H-204 Capitol Building
Washington, D.C. 20515-6537

Dear Leaders of Congress:

We write you, as leaders of Congress, to urge you to work together to prevent a looming problem that over the next several years may harm the health of more than 340,000 wounded, injured and ill veterans in 22 states who will be in need of care provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Without your intervention, these veterans are in jeopardy of losing that important health resource.

Since the 1990s, Congress has helped improve VA health care access and patient satisfaction by authorizing and funding nearly 900 VA community-based outpatient clinics. These are important facilities for local, convenient, and cost-effective primary care for millions of veterans. Unfortunately, a policy shift by the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) in 2012 has effectively halted Congressional authorization of leases for such new clinics. Also, as old leases expire and need reauthorization in future years, this CBO decision jeopardizes existing VA-leased health, research and other facilities.

Last year, CBO announced it would redefine 15 VA-proposed leases as “capital” leases and would treat them as current-year mandatory obligations, costing more than $1 billion altogether over a 20-year period. In order to advance these leases to approval, House budget rules would have forced an offset to equal the cost of these leases with an unrealistic Fiscal Year (FY) 2013 reduction in mandatory veterans’ programs. Since no such accommodation could be made in a single year, and VA had not addressed such an offset in its FY 2013 budget, the proposed lease authorizations were dropped from the authorizing bill. These 15 proposed community facilities are now in limbo, and veterans are not being served.

This unexpected challenge will not resolve itself absent action by House and Senate leadership to ensure Congress continues to authorize leases of local VA community-based outpatient clinics and other VA facilities when such approvals are needed. Also, the VA warns that over time numerous existing leases will be expiring. Lack of reauthorization could result in closures of current clinics. Newly proposed clinics without lease authorization cannot be activated. Costs of veterans’ VA care will be rising while they face longer travel and more waiting for needed treatment, or they may be forced to go without treatment.

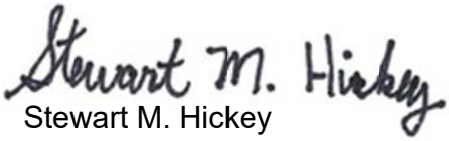
Committee leaders with jurisdiction over the VA have pledged to solve this problem, but no resolution has emerged since CBO's determination, made nine months ago. Without Leadership intervention, these promised clinics and more in the future cannot be activated or will be shut down, and wounded, injured and ill veterans in need will be denied VA health care.

The CBO's policy must be reversed or otherwise addressed in consultation with VA and the Office of Management and Budget. We ask that you take action that results in Congressional authorization of the 15 clinics still in limbo since 2012, the additional ones proposed earlier this year in VA's budget for FY 2014, and in general to find the means to allow VA's leased facilities to continue to provide flexible, low-cost VA care to wounded, injured and ill veterans. The current situation is unacceptable and must be remedied.

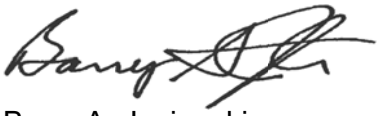
We appreciate your support for America's veterans and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

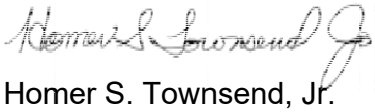
Peter S. Gaytan
Executive Director
The American Legion



Stewart M. Hickey
National Executive Director
AMVETS



Barry A. Jesinoski
Executive Director,
Washington Headquarters
Disabled American Veterans



Homer S. Townsend, Jr.
Executive Director
Paralyzed Veterans of America

Robert E. Wallace
Executive Director
Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States

c: Chairman and Ranking Member, Senate Appropriations Committee
Chairman and Ranking Member, Senate Budget Committee
Chairman and Ranking Member, Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
Chairman and Ranking Member, House Appropriations Committee
Chairman and Ranking Member, House Budget Committee
Chairman and Ranking Member, House Veterans' Affairs Committee