

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 3, 2025

The Honorable Doug Collins
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Collins,

We write today with serious concerns about the March 31, 2025, closure of the Wallowa County VA Clinic in Enterprise, Oregon, and the critical service gaps that this will create for veterans' care in our state's rural northeastern region.

As of this letter's date, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has yet to update its website to indicate this clinic is, in fact, closed. This is unacceptable. Our veterans deserve to know where they can seek care whenever they need it and should not have to drive miles and miles only to find a shuttered, abandoned clinic.

More importantly, we want assurances that the veterans of Wallowa County and surrounding areas will not experience disruptions in care. Our veterans need timely access to primary care, mental health, and suicide prevention programs, among other key services. Absent a clear, actionable plan from the VA, we remain deeply concerned about the Department's ability to deliver these services for people who earned them and expect the VA to follow through on its commitments.

Under your leadership, the VA has fired thousands of federal employees, including those who support the VA's crisis line and suicide prevention efforts, process claims for veterans' healthcare and benefits, and improve access for aging, rural, women, and minority veterans. The VA has also cancelled nearly 900 contracts, including those with professionals who support the delivery of healthcare to veterans and perform safety inspections of VA medical facilities. Further, the ongoing hiring freeze at the VA has worsened the severe shortage of critical specialties, making it increasingly difficult for the VA to recruit and hire doctors, nurses, and other healthcare professionals essential to providing quality care. Taken together, these actions have jeopardized the quality and timeliness of care for veterans nationwide. The closure of the Wallowa County VA Clinic in the context of all of these actions leaves us with deep concerns about how the VA will meet our veterans' needs.

For now, the VA appears to be encouraging veterans to seek care at neighboring clinics. While these health care facilities offer valuable services to rural Wallowa County residents, many of the veterans served by them experience backlogs to their care. In light of this, we ask that you respond to the following questions:

- How will the VA bolster resources at these neighboring facilities to accommodate the influx of patients they are likely to receive from the closure of the Wallowa County VA Clinic?

- Due to the other VA facilities being either one hour away at the La Grande VA Clinic, or more than two hours away at the Walla Walla VA Medical Center, what is the VA's plan to provide a transportation plan for veterans, particularly those facing travel hazards such as winter weather and summer wildfires?
- How will the VA ensure adequate travel reimbursement for that transportation?
- What is the VA's plan for veterans who cannot commute such long distances for care?

We recognize the VA is actively working with Winding Waters Clinic and eyeing a new Atlas clinic that plans to open in Enterprise. The proposed Atlas clinic lacks dedicated healthcare staff who will measure patient vitals, conduct diagnostic tests and imaging, perform physical exams or administer vaccines, which neglects the most fundamental services expected in a clinical setting. This is an insufficient alternative to the Wallowa County VA Clinic. Further, the VA cannot just rely on care in the community to fulfill veterans' needs, particularly when community resources are already strained and insufficient for our rural population.

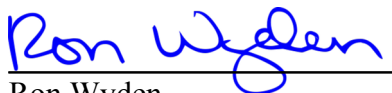
We have also heard the VA will continue to encourage veterans to seek out telehealth services. While telehealth is an important and innovative supplement to traditional health care infrastructure, we are concerned that a telehealth-only approach will fail to close widening health care gaps and will instead serve to further magnify disparities in access to care. Telehealth—which relies on sufficient access to the internet, availability of connected devices, and the ability to navigate the internet and internet-enabled devices—is simply not an option for many rural communities in and around Wallowa County.

As the VA works to establish workable alternatives for our veterans' care, we also seek clarity on the following:

- Will you commit to coordinating closely with local service providers and regularly updating the Wallowa County Veterans Service Officer to ensure a smooth transition?
- Will you commit to keeping our offices apprised of all developments with respect to services in Wallowa County and across the State of Oregon?

All of Oregon's veterans deserve the healthcare and benefits they are owed for their service to our nation, and we must continue to work to ensure they receive it. We expect a response to our letter no later than April 15, 2025.

Sincerely,



Ron Wyden
United States Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator