

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

April 3, 2020

Ryan Lilly, MPA
Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) 1
VA New England Healthcare System
200 Springs Road, Bldg. #61
Bedford, MA 01730

Dear Director Lilly:

We write to express our concern about the disturbing reports of the deaths of veteran residents at the Holyoke Soldiers' Home (HSH)¹ and the Chelsea Soldiers' Home (CSH),² to urge you to obtain more resources to stop the spread of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic at these facilities, and to ask that you work closely with the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Boston Healthcare System and the Governor's Office to appropriately hold Soldiers' Home officials accountable. Further, we ask that you take steps to ensure that other VA long-term care facilities in Massachusetts do not see similar outbreaks.

As we have seen with these two State Veterans homes, long-term care facilities are of particular concern as we respond to coronavirus. Long-term care facilities house populations that are particularly vulnerable to this virus, the elderly and individuals with chronic health conditions. As a result, these facilities have been the sources of some of the worst outbreaks of the virus, from Italy to Washington State.³ VA long-term care facilities may be especially

¹ MassLive, "Coronavirus: Holyoke Soldiers' Home superintendent placed on leave, at least 5 residents die from COVID-19," Jeanette DeForge, March 31, 2020, <https://www.masslive.com/news/2020/03/coronavirus-holyoke-soldiers-home-superintendent-on-leave-at-least-5-residents-die-from-covid-19.html>; WBUR, "11 Veterans Dead After Coronavirus Outbreak At Soldiers' Home In Holyoke," Miriam Wasser, March 31, 2020, <https://www.wbur.org/commonhealth/2020/03/30/veterans-died-soldiers-home-holyoke-coronavirus>; Boston Globe, "Three more residents die at Holyoke Soldiers' Home, site of state's largest fatal coronavirus outbreak," Naomi Martin & Hanna Krueger, April 2, 2020, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2020/04/02/metro/three-more-residents-die-holyoke-soldiers-home/>.

² WCVB, "2nd coronavirus death at Chelsea Soldiers' Home confirmed by Gov. Baker," April 1, 2020, <https://www.wcvb.com/article/resident-of-chelsea-soldiers-home-dies-after-contracting-covid-19/32005684>.

³ Reuters, "Uncounted among coronavirus victims, deaths sweep through Italy's nursing homes," Emilio Parodi, March 18, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-italy-homes-insigh/uncounted-among-coronavirus-victims-deaths-sweep-through-italys-nursing-homes-idUSKBN2152V0>; Washington Post, "As Washington nursing home assumed it faced influenza outbreak, opportunities to control coronavirus exposure passed," Jon Swaine and Maria Sacchetti, March 16, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/nursing-home-with-the-biggest-cluster-of-covid-19-deaths-to-date-in-the-us-thought-it-was-facing-an-influenza-outbreak-a-spokesman-says/2020/03/16/c256b0ee-6460-11ea-845d-e35b0234b136_story.html.

vulnerable as their patients are generally sicker and more likely to be male,⁴ both groups at particular risk from serious illness as a result of the virus.⁵

We welcome the April 1, 2020, announcement by Governor Baker that he has appointed outside counsel to carry out an independent investigation of the Holyoke Soldiers' Home and the circumstances that contributed to the coronavirus deaths at that facility.⁶ And we commend the Governor's Office and the Commonwealth's Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) and the Department of Public Health for deploying a clinical response team and the National Guard to test all HSH residents and staff, replacing the Superintendent pending the investigation, and establishing a hotline for family members of residents.⁷ We also understand that the VA Boston Healthcare System sent a team to the Chelsea Soldiers' Home to assist with coronavirus response efforts, and that VA Boston accepted a number of CSH patients and is providing testing capabilities and working on a containment plan.⁸ Given the high-risk resident populations at both facilities and the shortages of medical supplies across the Commonwealth,⁹ we are concerned that Chelsea Soldiers' Home is on the path to a similar outbreak.

We are also concerned about the potential for further spread of coronavirus at other VA facilities in the Commonwealth. The Holyoke and Chelsea Soldiers' Homes represent only a subset of VA long-term care facilities in Massachusetts.¹⁰ VA community living centers (CLCs, or nursing homes) in Massachusetts could face similar concerns regarding coronavirus. We have also heard anecdotal reports from other VA facilities in Massachusetts that VA staff lack needed personal protective equipment (PPE) and are being directed to continue working even after exposure to coronavirus and are not effectively isolating potentially infected veterans.

We remain deeply concerned about the health and safety of veteran residents and staff at long-term care facilities across the Commonwealth. Although we are encouraged by efforts underway to stop the spread at both facilities, the Soldiers' Homes, like VA facilities, hospitals and health care providers across Massachusetts, continue to lack desperately needed supplies and guidance. Therefore, we urge you to work diligently to obtain more resources so that the Soldiers' Homes and VA health care facilities in Massachusetts have the resources to test,

⁴ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General, "Review of VHA Community Living Centers and Corresponding Star Ratings," February 12, 2020, <https://www.va.gov/oig/pubs/VAOIG-18-05113-81.pdf>, at 21-29.

⁵ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "VA announces safeguards to protect nursing home and spinal cord injury patients," March 10, 2020. <https://www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=5400>.

⁶ Office Governor Charlie Baker, "Governor Charlie Baker Announces Attorney Mark W. Pearlstein to Investigate Holyoke Soldiers' Home," Press Release, April 1, 2020, <https://www.mass.gov/news/governor-charlie-baker-announces-attorney-mark-w-pearlstein-to-investigate-holyoke-soldiers>.

⁷ E-mail message from Office of Governor Charlie Baker to MA congressional delegation, April 1, 2020 [On File with Office of Senator Warren]. According to the Governor's Office, the Holyoke Soldiers' Home Family Hotline is 413-552-4764. Hours are Monday – Friday, 8am – 6pm, and Saturdays from 9am – 1pm. The Family Hotline can be reached by calling 413-552-4764.

⁸ Conference call between MA Congressional delegation staff and VA Boston and VA Central Western MA Healthcare Systems, April 2, 2020.

⁹ Boston Herald, "Massachusetts hospitals face shortages of protective equipment in coronavirus outbreak," Lisa Kashinsky, March 14, 2020, <https://www.bostonherald.com/2020/03/14/massachusetts-hospitals-face-shortages-ofprotective-equipment-in-coronavirus-outbreak/>.

¹⁰ Commonwealth of Massachusetts, "Long-Term Care – Soldiers' Homes for Veterans," <https://www.mass.gov/long-term-care-soldiers-homes-for-veterans>.

diagnose, and treat COVID-19 patients and to further mitigate the risk of infection to veterans and staff. We ask that you provide a briefing to our staff on these efforts as soon as possible so that we may work with you to ensure our veterans are getting the care they need.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

Richard E. Neal
Member of Congress

Ayanna Pressley
Member of Congress