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Call all Veterans: Show Your Numbers as We Work to Keep the VA Accountable

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Despite the inability to vote for the U.S. Commander-in-Chief, citizens of the Virgin Islands proudly serve in the military. Unfortunately, after serving honorably, Veterans in the Virgin Islands have continuously fallen victim to poor access to healthcare with little to no compensation on the benefits they were promised. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has failed to provide adequate medical services, along with questionable denial of health services, failure to offer pensions on time and the inability to attain home loans.

Veterans are eligible for essentially free medical care but the medical facilities in the Virgin Islands are limited and multiple challenges have disrupted care at the only hospitals on St. Thomas and St. Croix. Veterans are required to travel to Puerto Rico to receive care. Unfortunately, Veterans are not being compensated adequately for their medical travel to Puerto Rico's nearest facility. VA-trained doctors are sent on a quarterly basis to the Virgin Islands. Unfortunately, their primary purpose is to perform examinations for benefit claims – not to treat patients.

Additionally, local VA administrators have erroneously told local Veterans that means test results prevent them from receiving medical benefits. Veterans in the Virgin Islands have been strong advocates for their own medical center as the travel experience for most patients and their significant others to receive specialized care in San Juan is challenging, especially for Veterans with multiple conditions and limitations.

As an example, a local Veteran seeking care and counseling for his Post Traumatic Stress Disorder reported that by the time he arrives to his group therapy sessions in Puerto Rico, they are often over. This should not be. Megan Bland, a Professional Staffer with the House of Representatives Committee on Veterans' Affairs, conducted an assessment in July of this year describing the dismal state of local Veterans access to basic healthcare

and counseling. The assessment provided an in-depth look at the specific obstacles encountered on a regular basis by local Veterans seeking medical care.

Medical services are being provided, but some services are limited. The main hospital on each island should be the primary provider of healthcare to our Veterans. Veterans are relocated or referred to hospitals in Puerto Rico, but the existing referral program is flawed. The U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs needs to correct many of the problems limiting health care services for Veterans in the Virgin Islands, such as the shortage of drugs and medical supplies pre and post disaster.

The Veterans Choice Program gives a benefit that allows eligible Veterans to receive health care from a community provider rather than waiting for a VA appointment or traveling to a VA facility. Unfortunately, the Juan F. Luis Hospital in St. Croix only has one operating room post Hurricane Maria, and the Schneider Regional Hospital in St. Thomas remains in poor condition. What are we doing to increase local provider access?

Right now, as I write this, an amputee is struggling to receive a loan for his home, post-Hurricanes Irma and Maria. The \$20,000 dollars given to him from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is not nearly enough to fix his small structure in Garden Street, St. Thomas.

As Virgin Islands Veterans struggle to receive the benefits that they deserve, individuals in the community have reached out to offer a helping hand. Mr. Danny Derima of the Methodist Outreach Center offers shelters for Veterans. Similarly, Veteran Region Commander, Mr. Harry Daniel, makes time to hear the concerns of Veterans in St. John, while Ms. Hillis Benjamin does the same for those in St. Thomas, as Commander for the St. Thomas American Legion Hall.

The small size of the Veterans population and the geographic isolation of the Virgin Islands is not an excuse for the VA not to improve the medical care provided to our Veterans. The VA needs to continue to explore options that would improve the services available to Veterans who struggle with PTSD, substance abuse and other readjustment problems. The Virgin Islands is also in need of permanent VA staff located on all three islands.

In the town hall meetings I held last week on St. Thomas and St. Croix, our Veterans had an opportunity to discuss these issues directly with VA representatives from Washington D.C., Florida and Puerto Rico. My staff and I noted a number of action items regarding the improvement of Veterans access to healthcare locally and in Puerto Rico. We plan to follow up on these issues within the next 3-4 months and look forward to providing a progress report on the work done to address them. I also encourage all Veterans in the Virgin Islands to register for healthcare. While we work collaboratively with the VA to improve access to healthcare and other benefits, we need our Veterans to do their part to ensure that we can effectively advocate on their behalf.

Submitted by: Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett.

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