

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

February 5, 2016

The Honorable Robert McDonald
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary McDonald:

Our staff recently participated in a roundtable discussion on the implementation of the Choice Program in Maine along with representatives from the Veterans Affairs Maine Healthcare System, Health Net Federal Services, Veterans Service Organizations, and community care providers. Based on that meeting, as well as additional feedback from Maine constituents, we firmly believe that implementation of the Choice Program in our state remains deeply flawed. According to the VA, only 48 percent of eligible Choice Program patients have received the appointments they need and have requested. This is entirely unacceptable and must be addressed.

We are deeply concerned about communication gaps between Health Net Federal Services and community care providers, the VA, and veterans. Our offices have received numerous complaints from veterans and providers that they are unable to contact Health Net to schedule appointments or to resolve payment issues. Furthermore, even when veterans are able to connect with Health Net, referrals are not always timely or within a reasonable geographic distance to receive care, as those on the other end of the line are often thousands of miles away and lack understanding of Maine's geography.

To address these problems, we urge the VA to work with Health Net to hire personnel in Maine to work with the Maine VA Health Care System to strengthen Health Net's provider network based on existing and projected need. This could help ensure that veterans have timely access to providers who are located near where they live. A Health Net representative in Maine could also educate providers about the program to prevent future payment and referral errors. In addition, our offices must have a local point of contact at Health Net in order to assist our constituents when they seek help.

We also request that the VA provide its state medical centers, including the Maine VA Health Care System, the necessary flexibility and authority to continue using traditional non-VA community care programs to refer patients into the community. Veterans should not be forced to endure reduced quality of services as Health Net and the VA work to improve the Choice Program. As the VA and the leadership of Health Net identify ways to address these issues, please advise us of your plans to improve coordination and communication, including any recommendations that may require Congressional action. In addition, we would like to invite Dr. David Shulkin, Under Secretary of Health for the Department of Veterans Affairs, to Maine to review the Choice Program and discuss steps forward.

The persistent problems of the Choice Program have only reinforced the value of the Access Received Closer to Home, or ARCH, program in ensuring our veterans in rural areas receive the high quality and timely care they deserve. The authority for that program is scheduled to sunset in August

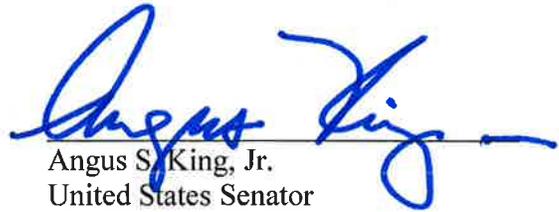
2016, which would have a dramatic effect on veterans in Maine. We urge you, in the strongest possible terms, to continue ARCH and incorporate the lessons learned from that program into the VA's larger community care model. We will continue to work to extend ARCH's statutory authority.

Thank you for your attention to these issues. We look forward to your response and to working with you to improve the Choice Program to ensure that our veterans receive the care they deserve. If you have questions regarding this matter, please contact us directly or have your staff contact our staff: Margaret Williams from Senator King's office at (202) 224-5344, Michele Pearce from Senator Collins' office at (202) 224-2523, Kate Renz from Congressman Poliquin's office at (202) 225-6306, or Joe Marro from Congresswoman Pingree's office at (202) 225-6116.

Sincerely,



Susan M. Collins
United States Senator



Angus S. King, Jr.
United States Senator



Chellie Pingree
Member of Congress



Bruce Poliquin
Member of Congress