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February 15, 2008

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WHITMAN

The Honorable James Peake  
Secretary of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20420-0001

Dear Secretary Peake,

Welcome to Eastern Washington! I want to extend my sincere gratitude for your service and commitment to our nation's veterans. I hope you will have the opportunity to appreciate the beauty of the Northwest and find the residents of this region very welcoming.

The Jonathan M. Wainwright Veterans Administration Medical Center is a very special place to veterans and to Eastern Washington. This vital facility provides access to quality and affordable health care for over 65,000 proud and deserving veterans.

I look forward to working with you and with other health care providers in our area ensure the availability of convenient health care to our veterans. After listening to the concerns of the providers within the facility, local civic leaders, veterans and constituents, I have come to understand why this facility is so vital to providing service to our veterans who would have to potentially endure a lesser quality of health if forced to seek services elsewhere.

Veterans seeking health care rely heavily on the Walla Walla facility because of the geographic and climactic challenges of the region. This facility provides care for our rural region including 14 different counties from Eastern Washington, Northern Idaho and Northeastern Oregon with a service area that includes more than 65,000 veterans in a 42,000 square-mile area and provides care to over 11,000 veterans annually – a number which will increase as more service men and women return from deployments.

Sharon Helman and her staff put forth a remarkable effort to care for veterans in this region. However, they are in desperate need of a new, modern facility that will facilitate the quality of care our deserving veterans require. Currently, there is a \$91 million renovation project scheduled for the Walla Walla facility to begin in 2012. However, I feel we are doing our veterans a disservice if we hesitate to do everything in our power to allocate these funds sooner and begin this renovation project no later than 2010.

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In recent years, the President and Congress have increased funding for veteran programs. It is important that we translate these funds into tangible assets for our nation's veterans. I applaud the recent increase of the mileage reimbursement rate for veterans. Some veterans travel great distances to receive care at VA facilities. With the price of gasoline over \$3.00 a gallon in many regions of the country, local veterans who travel to Seattle or Portland for health care pay for much of the travel expense out of their own pockets. The increase from 11 cents per mile to 28.5 cents is definitely a step in the right direction and I thank you for your efforts in bringing this increased benefit to our veterans.

In the few short months as Secretary, you have shown unwavering commitment to veterans who have fought for and secured the freedoms we enjoy in our great nation. I look forward to working with you on important issues that will benefit our veterans.

Best Wishes,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Cathy". The signature is written in a dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Cathy McMorris-Rodgers  
Member of Congress

CMR/ah