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Congress of the United States House of Representatives

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Mr. Ron Johnson
Director, Mann-Grandstaff VA Medical Center
4815 North Assembly Street
Spokane, Washington 99205

Mr. Johnson,

I am writing to share my ongoing concerns about the decision by the Spokane VA Medical Center to terminate the ability of veterans to access physical therapy services through the Minimally Supervised Group (MSG).

In August, I learned that veterans participating in the MSG were informed that the program was being terminated with very little notice. This short notice caused many of these veterans to experience a great deal of stress and anxiety. The veterans in the program, who were using the physical therapy equipment without direct supervision from a therapist, were able to maintain a healthy lifestyle, meet their physical therapy and mobility goals, and improve their overall health as a result of regular exercise.

My staff met with several of these veterans shortly after they received this notification, and as you know, my office helped facilitate a meeting with you to discuss the situation and determine whether a compromise could be reached to allow their continued participation in the program. I appreciate your willingness to meet with this group for that purpose.

Prior to this meeting, I expressed my concerns about the short notice the veterans received and the impact it would have on their physical and mental well-being. As a result of our conversation, I had some reassurance from you that there could be a compromise reached that would allow for the veterans to continue the use of the facility equipment.

Unfortunately, the meeting did not yield a mutually acceptable agreement in that regard. After the meeting, members of the veterans' group informed me they were not offered a compromise to be allowed to continue their activities. Moreover, they also informed me that they were told "they were not patients," which they interpreted as disrespectful and not "being welcome at their VA."

A recent response from the Medical Center to an inquiry from my office on behalf of an affected veteran claims that "significant growth over the last few years" is the reason for terminating this program. The letter further stated that, since "2014 there has been an increase in staff from 12 to 19 employees which has increased the demand for services." The letter additionally directs the veteran to access the Vet Center programs or go to a community-based gym. In addition, the letter notes that 19.4 percent of veterans are unable to get appointments within 30 days of the "clinically indicated date" due to increased demand.

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The letter also directed veterans to contact the Vet Center for alternatives. However, after doing so, the veteran was told there are no "groups available" that will provide the physical exercise they need. In addition, most of the veterans in the MSG group tell me they do not have the necessary resources to purchase memberships at local health clubs. They have also told me the reason they use the VA is that most of them share the camaraderie of their service and feel safer when around other veterans.

I would like to know whether the inability of veterans to obtain appointments in a timely manner is due to the use of the equipment by the MSG group or the non-availability of staff to meet with the new veterans. I ask because veterans have told me that on most occasions when they were using the equipment "they were the only ones in the exercise room." In that regard, would you provide me a breakdown on utilization of the equipment, by hour and day? In addition, I would like to know how many veterans are assigned to each physical therapist at the hospital and what percentage of their time is spent on the exercise equipment. Further, could you provide information documenting how many of those visits are no shows or cancellations, either on the part of the clinic or by the veteran?

I firmly believe there is and should be a mutually-agreeable way forward that will allow veterans participating in the MSG group to continue doing so in a manner that does not impact the ability of those under the care of VA physicians to utilize physical therapy equipment in a timely manner. For instance, could veterans in the MSG group enter into a Memorandum of Understanding with the Medical Center that would govern the terms and conditions under which the MSG could continue?

We need to find a solution to this issue and solve this problem as soon as possible. I would like to continue this conversation and meet with you personally about the situation at your earliest convenience.

I look forward to discussing this matter soon.

Sincerely,

Cathy McMorris Rodgers
Member of Congress