

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 3, 2020

VIA ELECTRONIC DELIVERY

The Honorable Robert Wilkie
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave. NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary Wilkie:

We write with regard to the status of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Foreign Medical Program (FMP) during the coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and request you act swiftly to implement an emergency response to cover the costs of COVID-19 testing and treatment for Veterans living abroad.

As part of the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Office of Community Care, FMP covers the costs of medically necessary healthcare services, durable medical equipment and U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved medications for eligible Veterans living or travelling abroad. VA relies on FMP to provide services at the Manila Outpatient Clinic in the Philippines, as well as to the thousands of Veterans who use the program throughout the world. In Fiscal Year 2019, more than 5,000 Veterans utilized FMP in over 90 countries ranging from Afghanistan to the United Kingdom.

Currently, FMP benefits are limited to services that are medically necessary to treat a service-connected disability or for a condition associated with and held to be aggravating a service-connected disability. Of the 197 countries recognized by the United Nations, all but 10 of them have reported outbreaks of COVID-19. The VA must be prepared to respond to Veterans abroad that require treatment for COVID-19, regardless of service-connection.

The recently enacted Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Emergency Response (CARES) Act provides an additional \$2.1 billion for VA's community care to prevent, prepare for and respond to COVID-19, domestically or internationally. Considering the Office of Community Care is responsible for FMP, including the authorization of benefits and the processing and payment of claims, we urge VA to appropriately determine the amount of CARES Act funding that should be utilized for the FMP's response to Veterans currently outside of the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic response, and to presumptively assume COVID-19 aggravates all service-connected disabilities for purposes of FMP's emergency response during the ongoing global pandemic response. We also urge VA to authorize FMP coverage for costs of all COVID-19 drugs, treatments, and services which receive FDA Emergency Use Authorization. If VA is unable to do so, we request an expeditious response informing me what specific authorities VA need to receive to provide this coverage.

Letter to Secretary Wilkie

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We thank you in advance for your consideration of our urgent request.

Sincerely,

Tammy Duckworth

Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator

Sherrod Brown

Sherrod Brown
United States Senator

Richard Blumenthal

Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator

Mazie K. Hirono

Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator

Bernard Sanders

Bernard Sanders
United States Senator