



**THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS  
WASHINGTON**

March 23, 2020

U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Member of Congress:

We have received many Congressional inquiries regarding the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) fourth mission and the process for requesting VA support attendant with that mission. I write to clarify these matters.

VA is prepared to take on our fourth mission of assisting certain non-VA health care systems and communities if they reach their full capacity to care for patients. However, there is a formal process for requesting VA fourth mission and other Federal support.

America's response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak is one that is federally supported, state managed, and locally executed. As such, requests for all Federal support should come from the states when they have determined that the maximum capacity of intrastate or interstate resources have been exhausted.

In that event, states may request assistance from the Federal Government through their local Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Regional Emergency Coordinator (REC), as part of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) National Response Coordination Center. Counties, cities, and other municipalities should route all requests for Federal support through their respective states.

FEMA is now leading Federal operations on behalf of the White House Coronavirus Task Force, which oversees the whole-of-Government response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and HHS is now integrated into FEMA's National Response Coordination Center.

VA cannot receive direct requests for assistance from state and local governments. The established central coordination function of FEMA and HHS will ensure that an integrated and effective response is provided to those communities that need assistance the most; but that assistance is dependent upon the availability of resources and funding, and consistency with VA's mission to provide priority services to Veterans.

VA has defined roles in both the National Disaster Medical System and the National Response Framework in the event of national emergencies. Our COVID-19 emergency preparedness exercises began weeks before the first case was confirmed in the United States, and VA has plans in place to protect everyone who gets care, visits, or works at one of our facilities.

VA has taken a number of significant steps over the past few weeks to maximize capacity and resources so that the Department will be ready if called upon by FEMA and HHS to provide assistance to select non-VA health care systems and communities. These steps include the following:

- Maximizing the use of telehealth and virtual care for routine appointments;
- Canceling elective surgeries; and
- Pre-screening all patients and visitors for COVID-19 symptoms before they enter VA facilities.

We ask for your assistance in encouraging non-VA medical facilities in your states and districts to take similar steps in order to ensure local health care systems are best equipped to help stop the spread of COVID-19, and to handle as many COVID-19 patients as possible.

To request Federal Government assistance, please contact your State's HHS REC at <https://www.phe.gov/Preparedness/responders/rec/Pages/default.aspx>. More information on VA's COVID-19 response activities, updates can be found at <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/n-coronavirus>.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert L. Wilkie". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Robert" and last name "Wilkie" being the most prominent parts.

Robert L. Wilkie