

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-0906

August 22, 2014

The Honorable Robert A. McDonald
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonald,

First, I would like to congratulate you on your recent appointment as the new Secretary of Veterans Affairs. The VA faces many challenges, and your experience and accomplishments make you a great choice to reform such a troubled agency. I look forward to working with you to provide relief for our veterans.

I am requesting your intervention with issues previously addressed to Acting Secretary Gibson, namely, the delay in construction of a new St. Johns County (SJC) Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC). The delay of either a permanent or interim site will critically impact over 5000 veterans that are receiving care from a local VA clinic in St. Augustine (Enclosure 1). Current CBOC land has been sold to Lowes and all personnel are to be relocated prior to the mandated vacation date of March 2015. Without a plan in place for a new or temporary facility, there seems to be a real possibility that SJC veterans will experience an unacceptable interruption in services.

It was later brought to my attention that GSA had placed a moratorium on all VA lease agreements. Senator Rubio and I then expressed concern to GSA Administrator Tangherlini which resulted in GSA granting authority to the VA to execute a lease for a temporary CBOC on July 29 (Enclosure 2).

On August 5, 2014, the SJC Board of County Commissioners (BCC) unanimously moved to authorize the County Administrator to offer the new SJC Health and Human Services building as a permanent site under the terms of the existing lease which had been in place for a number of years. Another congressional letter including an executive summary of this proposal was sent to the North Florida/South Georgia Veterans Health System (NFSG-VHS) requesting VA expert review (Enclosure 3).

I, along with many veterans in the community, find it very disappointing that no response to date has been received from the VA on any of our correspondence. Unfortunately, this only leads to further deterioration of public confidence in the VA, as the local community has not been reassured of continued CBOC health services in the area. I ask for your immediate intervention and for a resolution that addresses our community's concerns.

I appreciate your attention to these matters and look forward to the VA's concrete plans to serve our constituents and veterans in the greater St. Augustine area.

Sincerely,



Ron DeSantis
Member of Congress

Enclosures (3)

Enclosure 1 – Letter to Acting Secretary Gibson on July 14, 2014

Enclosure 2 – Letter to GSA Administrator Tangherlini on July 25, 2014

Enclosure 3 – Letter to NFSG-VHS on August 5, 2014

RON DeSANTIS
6TH DISTRICT, FLORIDA

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND
GOVERNMENT REFORM
COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY

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July 14, 2014

The Honorable Sloan D. Gibson
Acting Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Acting Secretary Gibson,

It has come to our attention that there are unanswered questions regarding the status of the VA Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) in St. Augustine, Florida. We understand that the facility's lease will end after March 31, 2015, and that a finalized plan for a continuation of services in the St. Augustine area has not been specified. There are over 20,000 veterans in St. Johns County and the local CBOC provides outpatient care to more than 5,000 patients. Specifically, the clinic provides a broad range of general and specialized medical, psychiatric, nursing, women's health, social work, and ancillary services for the primary care patient.

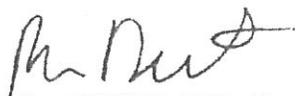
It is our understanding that a Request for Proposal (RFP) has been submitted for a new leased facility and is in the review process at the VA but concerns remain about potential lapsed time between construction of a new facility/interim facility and the end of the lease that could cause interruptions in clinic services. Specifically, is there a plan in place to facilitate a continuation of services if a new facility is not constructed and opened before the end of March?

Separately, we understand that St. Johns County has established new offices that house components of Health and Human Services as well as the County Veteran Services Office. Would using the county's facility, with its centralized location for services, be a suitable option for the VA CBOC to continue quality care for our veterans on either a temporary or permanent basis?

We are committed to ensuring that the veterans served by St. Augustine's VA CBOC are provided uninterrupted services during this transition.

We appreciate your attention to these matters and look forward to the VA's concrete plans to serve our constituents and veterans.

Sincerely,



Ron DeSantis
Member of Congress



Marco Rubio
United States Senator

RON DESANTIS
5TH DISTRICT, FLORIDA

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July 25, 2014

The Honorable Daniel M. Tangherlini
Administrator
General Services Administration
1800 F Street, NW, Room 6120
Washington, DC 20405

Dear Administrator Tangherlini,

Last week, we sent a letter to the Acting Department of Veteran Affairs' (VA) Sloan Gibson regarding the status of the VA Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) in St. Augustine, Florida. There are over 20,000 veterans in St. Johns County and the local CBOC provides outpatient care to more than 5,000 patients. Specifically, the clinic provides a broad range of general and specialized medical, psychiatric, nursing, women's health, social work, and ancillary services for primary care patients.

We understand that the facility's lease will end after March 31, 2015, and that a finalized plan for a continuation of services in the St. Augustine area has not been specified. Furthermore, it is our understanding that an interagency dispute between the VA and the General Services Administration (GSA) has caused a moratorium on new leases nation-wide. We find this to be an unacceptable situation, given that it could cause an interruption in our veterans' care.

The VA has submitted a Request for Proposal for a new leased facility and is reportedly in the review process. Major concerns voiced by senior VA officials and County Executives have underscored the impact of the GSA leasing constraint. These constraints exacerbate the ability to move forward on an interim facility agreement and could lead to a crisis in care for our veterans. We believe your intervention in this dispute is critical for ensuring a timely solution.

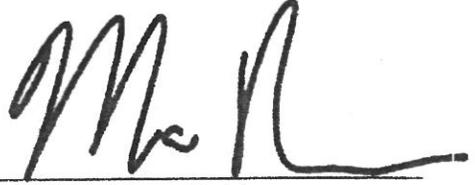
Additionally, St. Johns County has generously offered unused portions of county land for a temporary CBOC by the VA to provide services to local veterans during the time that construction of the permanent facility in St. Johns County, Florida is underway. Local VA leadership has been working closely with the St. Johns County executives in regards to these contingencies. We ask that the GSA offer an immediate exemption to the nation-wide moratorium for the St. Augustine community to allow for the construction or leasing of a temporary facility to proceed in order to ensure our former service members are not without proper medical care for any period of time.

We appreciate your attention to these matters and look forward to the VA and GSA's concrete plans to serve our constituents and veterans.

Sincerely,



Ron DeSantis
Member of Congress



Marco Rubio
United States Senator

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

5 August 2014

Mr. Nick Ross
Assistant Director
North Florida/South Georgia
Veterans Health System

Dear Mr. Ross,

Jerry Cameron, Assistant Count Administrator, St. Johns County (SJC), presented the attached proposal to you on Friday, August 1, 2014. This same proposal was presented to the SJC Board of County Commissioners (BCC) on 5 August 2014. The SJC BCC unanimously moved to authorize the County Administrator to offer the new facility to the VA under the terms of the existing CBOC lease, and to have that space available for the 2015 deadline.

The SJC Attorney was informed by VA General Council, Washington DC that "exceptions to the federal procurement process are possible, if an appropriate exception is determined." To fill a critical and time urgent CBOC requirement the SJC proposal appears to give merit in applying an exception.

I request appropriate VA experts review and provide rationale for or against moving forward with the SJC VA CBOC proposal. Captain Randy Stapleford USN (Ret) is my District Military and Veteran Affairs Representative. If you have further questions please do not hesitate to contact him at telephone number 904.827.1101/ FAX: 904.827.1114/ or email: randy.stapleford@mail.house.gov.

Please ensure your responses are delivered to my Saint Augustine District office and to his attention. Address: 3940 Lewis Speedway, Suite 2104, St. Augustine, FL 32084

Sincerely,



Ron DeSantis
Member of Congress (FL06)
RD/jrs

Executive Summary

VA CBOC History and Proposal

By Jerry Cameron

St. Johns County (SJC) has been continuously involved in trying to facilitate a new location for the Veterans Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) since late 2011 when we notified them that the building they were presently occupying was being sold and must be vacated no later than the end of March 2015.

Initially the Veterans Administration (VA) declined to relocate to the new facility for our Health and Human Service (HHS) operations. The VA cited a variety of concerns with the new location, which turned out to be invalid or easily resolved. The VA ultimately denied SJC the opportunity to participate in the procurement process, citing the new HHS location was out of their search area.

As time passed SJC became increasingly concerned and then alarmed that the VA was not making progress toward procuring a facility which would allow them to relocate prior to the mandatory vacation date. The consequences of holding over after March of 2015 are manifold; including loss of sales and property tax revenue, loss of dozens of new jobs for SJC residents, and possibly jeopardizing the sale transaction itself.

SJC repeatedly expressed its concern to the VA. However, by this time there was a national freeze which arrested the VA's procurement process. Alarmed, SJC then contacted Congressional Representatives to alert them to the pending crisis. Both Senator Rubio and Congressman DeSantis mobilized their staff to provide pressure on the bureaucracy to allow procurement to proceed. While they were involved in this process SJC staff continued to try to find potential solutions for an interim clinic. The VA informed SJC staff the best alternative for an interim solution was Modular Clinic Space, and they would need suitable space for the modular units. SJC staff identified several locations, and the VA ultimately chose a site owned by SJC Utilities on Inman Rd. SJC offered to make this site available at no charge to the VA.

In late July of 2014, Congressman DeSantis and Senator Rubio were successful in removing barriers to contracting for temporary space. The VA asked SJC to reserve the Inman Road site, but they also wanted to look at other options. SJC staff again became concerned that further delay would certainly mean the vacation deadline could not be met. SJC staff continued to look for solutions, and promised to lend all possible assistance to the VA regardless of which course they took. During the last week of July SJC Construction Services identified a unique opportunity and approached the HHS building contractor if it would be possible to finish a building to house the VA by the 2015 deadline. The contractor stated that since he was fully mobilized, and all sub-contractors were on site he could meet that deadline if he had direction to proceed.

A meeting of interested parties including, SJC staff, VA staff, and representatives of Congressman DeSantis and Senator Rubio, was called and met on August 1, 2014. SJC again pledged to assist the VA in any way possible, and informed them that it was the intention of SJC Administration to propose to the SJC Board of County Commissioners (BCC) agreeing to build the facility for the VA at the HHS site, and to provide it to them under the terms of the existing lease which had been in place for a number of years.

This proposal was presented to the SJC BCC at their regular meeting on August 5, 2014. The BCC unanimously moved to authorize the County Administrator to offer the new facility to the VA under the terms of the existing lease, and to have that space available for the 2015 deadline, provided this offer was accepted within the window of opportunity.