

December 7, 2023

The Honorable Denis McDonough
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough,

I am writing today regarding an alarming report^[1] that Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) resources are being diverted from our nation's veterans to process the medical claims of illegal immigrants held in the custody of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

According to the report, ICE is utilizing the VA's Financial Service Center to process reimbursements to independent private health care providers to service illegal immigrants under ICE detention who require specialty or emergency care. While the Biden Administration must respond to the humanitarian crisis that its policies have helped to create, I am very concerned that diverting VA resources will make it more difficult for our nation's veterans to receive timely, high-quality health care.

Montana has the second highest number of veterans per capita in the country and every day I hear stories about the deteriorating access to quality care provided by the VA. According to data from the VA, at Fort Harrison VA Medical Center – Montana's largest VA health care facility – wait times can be as long as 123 days for veterans seeking dental care and 70 days for those needing mental health care appointments. Additionally, there are nearly 318,221 backlogged claims nationally—which includes disability compensation and pension claims that have been received by VA that requires development and a decision by a VA claims processor – as of September 2023. This represents a nearly 10 year high. In stark contrast, illegal immigrants in ICE facilities appear to face low barriers to accessing specialty or emergency health care. This disparity is unacceptable and dishonors Montana's veterans who must deal with long wait times and excessive delays to see health care providers.

The Biden administration created this humanitarian and national security crisis at the border. And as I have said many times, the crisis can only be fixed by deliberate and targeted policy changes that enforce the rule of law, tighten our asylum standards, rein in the Department of Homeland Security's parole power, and finish the southern border wall.

^[1] <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/vas-role-migrant-medical-care-draws-scrutiny-advocates-border-crisis-intensifies>

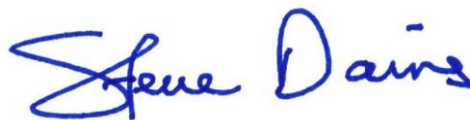
United States Senate

However, rather than pursue these meaningful policy reforms that would reduce the number of immigrants illegally entering our country, it is disheartening that your administration prefers to divert VA resources away from the veterans they are meant to benefit. Veterans deserve answers as to why, at a time when they are struggling to access quality and timely health care, the VA has decided to prioritize the health care of illegal immigrants over that of their own. Thus, I request answers to the following questions.

1. Not including efforts to facilitate COVID-19 vaccinations, how long has the Department of Veterans' Affairs policy to process the medical claims of illegal immigrants detained by ICE been in effect?
2. Specifically, what are the details of the VA's agreement with ICE to process said medical claims? Are there circumstances where unlawful immigrants are placed higher in priority than veterans?
3. What other services, specifically, is the VA currently providing to help address the record-breaking number of illegal immigrants crossing our southern border?
4. How many VA personnel are utilized in carrying out the policy described above?
5. Were the Chairmen of the Senate and House Veterans Affairs Committees notified of the diversion of resources?

I look forward to your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Steve Daines
United States Senator