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December 13, 2023

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

Dear Secretary McDonough:

I write to shed light on a pervasive issue that continues to affect over 20,000 veterans in the 34th Congressional District of Texas and thousands more throughout the Rio Grande Valley. As you know, the Rio Grande Valley lacks a Veterans Affairs (VA) hospital.

The Rio Grande Valley is located at the southernmost part of Texas and is bordered by Fort Sam Houston, Lackland Air Force Base, Randolph Air Force Base, Corpus Christi Army Depot, Naval Air Station Corpus Christi, and Naval Air Station Kingsville. We have a large active-duty and veteran population yet continue to lack the adequate VA healthcare coverage that is needed to serve our region. In fact, Texas has the largest veteran population and leads the nation in PACT Act claims – meaning a higher number of veterans will be dependent on VA healthcare in the coming years. Furthermore, the Rio Grande Valley is a community on the rise. Our population consisting of over 1.3 million is expected to double by 2045, which will further strain the VA healthcare system in South Texas as more servicemembers retire and veterans relocate.

South Texas is a medically underserved region. According to the Texas Department of Health and Human Services, the Rio Grande Valley is projected to have the state's greatest percentage of unmet demand for nurses and a severe shortage of physicians by 2032. The fact is—the infrastructure is not in place to more demand on community providers by also taking on the patient load of our veterans. The VA needs to help our veterans and meet the demands of our region, which has been overlooked for far too long.

I have heard from hundreds of veterans in South Texas who do not have the means or the time to traverse the distance required to receive care for service-connected ailments. Currently, veterans in the Valley must travel nearly 300 miles to receive care from the closest VA hospital, the Audie L. Murphy Memorial Veterans' Hospital in San Antonio, Texas. Centers such as the VA Texas Valley Coastal Bend Health Care System in Harlingen, Texas, provide a great service to our community but are limited in the services they can provide. Additionally, I am aware and tracking ongoing lease disputes pertaining to VA clinics in my district and the local university, which if terminated, will disrupt care and the well-being of all veterans in South Texas.

It is past time we address this issue and provide adequate healthcare to veterans in the Rio Grande Valley. The veterans of the Rio Grande Valley who have put life and limb on the line deserve access to the same services that other Texas veterans have. A VA hospital will serve the existing population and accommodate our region's continued exponential growth. Therefore, I urge your attention to this matter and address this shortfall. I look forward to your response and working together to address the needs our veterans.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Vicente Gonzalez', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Vicente Gonzalez
Member of Congress