

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC  
20510

April 16, 2024

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

Dear Secretary McDonough:

Thank you for your ongoing commitment to providing best-in-class health care to our nation's veterans, ensuring that we provide those who served with the same level of service that they offered our country. As our nation's largest integrated health care system, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) sets the standards for high-quality care. We write today to inquire about access to non-opioid pain alternatives throughout the VA system.

We commend the VA on their overall reduction in opioid prescriptions – a significant accomplishment when two-thirds of veterans report experiencing pain.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, estimates show that opioids remain the default treatment for patients with acute pain, and more than 3.75 million initiate long-term opioid use after a low-risk surgery.<sup>2</sup> Given these data and compounded with the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the United States remains deep in an ongoing opioid epidemic with a record-breaking number of overdose deaths last year.<sup>3</sup>

We also know active-duty service members, veterans, retirees and their families are not immune to the opioid addiction crisis. Nearly half of combat wounded veterans report misuse of prescription opioids.<sup>4</sup> Drug overdose mortality rates among veterans also increased by 53% from 2010–2019.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, it is even more important to protect veterans from unnecessary exposure to prescription opioids.

One critical tool to prevent opioid addiction before it starts is to incentivize the use of VA approved non-opioid pain management options, including drugs and devices. In recent years,

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<sup>1</sup> National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA). Substance Use and Military Life DrugFacts. October 2019

<sup>2</sup> Hah, J. M., Bateman, B. T., Ratliff, J., Curtin, C., & Sun, E. (2017). Chronic Opioid Use After Surgery: Implications for Perioperative Management in the Face of the Opioid Epidemic. *Anesthesia and Analgesia*, 125(5), 1733–1740. <https://doi.org/10.1213/ANE.0000000000002458>

<sup>3</sup> Mann, B. (2023, May 18). U.S. Drug overdose deaths hit a record in 2022 as some states see a big surge. *NPR*.

<sup>4</sup> Michelle L. Kelley, Adrian J. Bravo, Victoria R. Votaw, Elena Stein, Jason C. Redman, Katie Witkiewitz. Opioid and sedative misuse among veterans wounded in combat. *Addictive Behaviors*, 92. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2018.12.007>.

<sup>5</sup> Alex S. Bennett, Honoria Guarino, Peter C. Britton, Dan O'Brien-Mazza, Stephanie H. Cook, Franklin Taveras, Juan Cortez & Luther Elliott (2022) U.S. Military veterans and the opioid overdose crisis: a review of risk factors and prevention efforts, *Annals of Medicine*, 54:1, 1826-1838, DOI: 10.1080/07853890.2022.2092896

Congress has prioritized efforts to increase access to these treatments, most recently in Medicare. With these efforts in mind, we respectfully request information to the following questions:

1. How many non-opioid pain alternatives are currently included in the VA National Formulary (VANF)?
2. How frequently are non-opioid alternatives utilized in the VA system compared to opioid treatments for acute pain? Please provide any national-level data available on dispensing and usage of non-opioid pain alternatives to treat acute pain in the VA facilities and community care sites.
3. What steps has the VA already taken to transition from opioid analgesics to non-opioid pain alternatives to treat acute pain? Please also provide a summary of your ability to consider immediate action to add safe, effective non-opioid drugs to the VANF.
4. What steps can Congress take to facilitate these efforts?

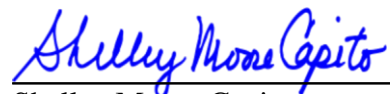
We respectfully request a response to this letter by May 16, 2024. We greatly appreciate the VA's ongoing work to care for our nation's veterans, and thank you for your prompt attention to this request.

Sincerely,



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Jeanne Shaheen  
United States Senator



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Shelley Moore Capito  
United States Senator



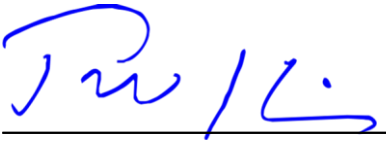
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Tammy Baldwin  
United States Senator



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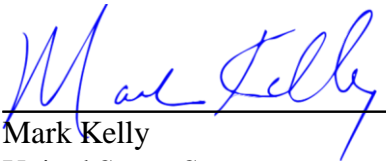
Mike Braun  
United States Senator



Tim Kaine  
United States Senator



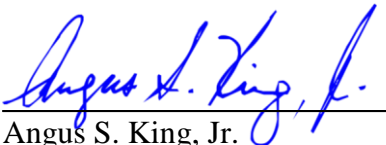
James Lankford  
United States Senator



Mark Kelly  
United States Senator



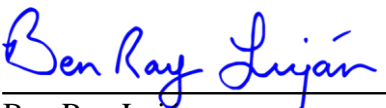
Steve Daines  
United States Senator



Angus S. King, Jr.  
United States Senator



Lisa Murkowski  
United States Senator



Ben Ray Lujan  
United States Senator



Kevin Cramer  
United States Senator



Christopher S. Murphy  
United States Senator



Deb Fischer  
United States Senator



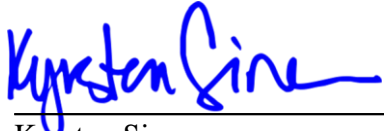
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Joe Manchin III  
United States Senator



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John Boozman  
United States Senator



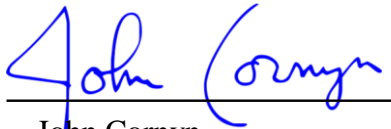
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Kyrsten Sinema  
United States Senator



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John Hoeven  
United States Senator



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John Cornyn  
United States Senator



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Bill Hagerty  
United States Senator



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Pete Ricketts  
United States Senator



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John Barrasso  
United States Senator