

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

December 11, 2007

The Honorable Michael J. Kussman, MD  
Under Secretary for Health for the Veterans Health Administration  
Department of Veterans Affairs, Central Office  
810 Vermont Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Dr. Kussman:

We write to urge you to establish two additional Vet Centers in the state of Wisconsin, one in La Crosse County and another in Brown County. We were disappointed that none of the 23 new Vet Centers to be opened in the United States in 2007 and 2008 will be located in Wisconsin, which is greatly underserved within the current Vet Center system. We are very concerned that roughly forty percent of Wisconsin veterans do not currently have reasonable access to a Vet Center. Servicemembers are returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with alarming rates of PTSD and other mental health and readjustment issues. Additional Vet Centers are urgently needed to ensure that Wisconsin veterans and their families have reasonable access to necessary counseling in the welcoming, non-clinical environment that Vet Centers offer.

Wisconsin only has two Vet Centers, both in the southern part of the state, to serve 469,000 veterans. Most states with similar veterans populations have over double this number of Vet Centers. Maryland has fewer veterans than Wisconsin and is one fifth the size of the state but nonetheless has four Vet Centers. Massachusetts is nearly one eighth the size of Wisconsin with only a slightly larger veterans population, but it has seven Vet Centers. When you compare the number of Vet Centers in Wisconsin relative to the number of veterans in the state and the size of the state, Wisconsin ranks seventh from the bottom in terms of the availability of Vet Centers.

We have heard from many Wisconsin veterans and veterans service officers who are concerned that there are insufficient counseling resources in Wisconsin. Our research indicates that, based on the VA's 2005 data, roughly 185,912 Wisconsin veterans (40%) do not have a Vet Center close enough for them to seek counseling on a regular basis. See attached map. To seek care at a Vet Center, these veterans would need to drive over two hours round trip. This makes it extremely difficult for these veterans and their families to seek care routinely or easily, especially in instances when an individual suffering from combat-related stress needs to speak with a counselor in person, upon short notice.

As a result, too many veterans and families in Wisconsin will not be able to readily access the Vet Center counseling they need, sometimes desperately. If the VA were to establish two new Vet Centers in these proposed locations, roughly 82% of Wisconsin veterans would be within an hour drive of a Vet Center.

The La Crosse County location would also benefit the approximately 7,000 veterans in Houston and Winona Counties in Minnesota. Currently these veterans must travel over an hour to the Vet Center in the Twin Cities. Allamakee County in extreme Northeast Iowa with about 2,000 veterans would also benefit from this Vet Center.

We appreciate that the VA is in the process of establishing 23 new Vet Centers and that these centers are complemented by private counselors and phone counseling. Unfortunately, the availability of contracted-out, private counselors and phone counseling does not substitute for the availability of Vet Centers. As you know, Vet Centers play an important outreach role. Many veterans would never learn about the availability of a range of VA services, including private counselors, if it were not for the fact that there is a Vet Center in their community where they can ask for assistance in a non-clinical setting. In addition, telephone counseling does not provide the human contact that many veterans need to establish a meaningful therapeutic relationship with a counselor.

We therefore urge you to consider our request to establish two new centers in Wisconsin, one in La Crosse County and one in Brown County. Thank you for your attention to our urgent request. We look forward to working with you to bring about two new Vet Centers in Wisconsin in the very near future.

Sincerely,

Arnold D. Feigelt

[Signature]

Jim Jacobson

Dwen Moore

Ron Kind

Herb Kohl

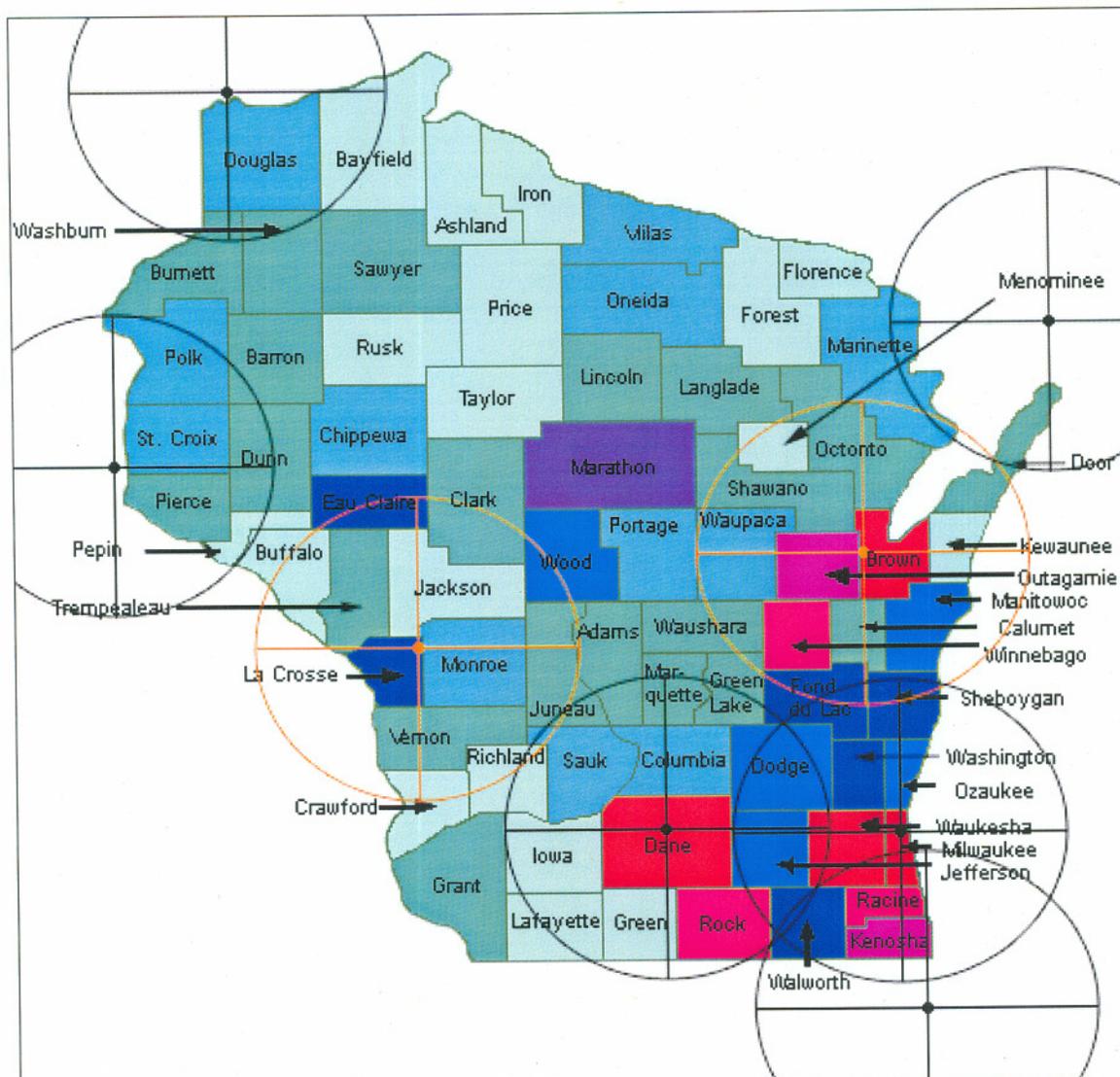
Tim Petri

Tammy Baldwin

Paul Ryan

Steve Kuyono

## Proposed Vet Centers



Existing centers are indicated in black.  
 Proposed new centers are indicated in orange.  
 Circles represent roughly an hour driving time.

Map Color	Number of Veterans
Pale Blue	0-2000
Turquoise	2000-4000
Light Blue	4000-6000
Blue	6000-8000
Dark Blue	8000-10000
Purple	10000-12000
Pink	12000-14000
Red	14000-16000
Dark Red	>16000