

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 30, 2019

The Honorable Robert Wilkie
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary Wilkie,

We are writing to request an update on the current efforts of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to adapt its mission, facilities, and operations to climate change, and to ask that the department regularly incorporate the prudent management of climate risks into its efforts to deliver timely and high quality care and benefits to our nation's veterans.

Climate change poses a significant threat to America's built infrastructure, including properties that the federal government owns or leases to deliver essential services. According to the Fourth National Climate Assessment produced by 13 federal government agencies, "Without adaptation, climate change will continue to degrade infrastructure performance over the rest of the century, with the potential for cascading impacts that threaten our economy, national security, essential services, and health and well-being."¹

The VA and the veterans it serves are not immune to this climate risk. In 2014, the department acknowledged the threat of climate change in its *Climate Change Adaptation Plan*, which observed:

VA's primary vulnerabilities are the susceptibility of its infrastructure to damage and the burdens placed on its healthcare delivery systems. VA's built infrastructure – including buildings, installed capital equipment, and on-site facilities – is vulnerable to physical damage and to interruptions in the supply of energy and material resources upon which that infrastructure relies.

And that

Climate change could have widespread effects on Veterans' health, including long-lasting chronic effects, as well as effects on the need for emergency medicine. Climate change could also affect the health of VA staff.²

¹ U.S. Global Change Research Program, "Fourth National Climate Assessment," November 23, 2018, https://nca2018.globalchange.gov/downloads/NCA4_Report-in-Brief.pdf.

² U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "Climate Change Adaptation Plan," June 2014, <https://www.energy.va.gov/docs/VAccap2014.pdf>.

The VA's *Climate Change Adaptation Plan* issued in 2014 appears to be the VA's most recent plan of its kind. In it, the VA described various actions the agency has taken or was in the process of taking, to "build resilience" against climate risks. These include developing a "Sea-Level Rise (SLR) Standard" to protect VA buildings from flooding, considering climate change when designing VA facilities, reducing dependence on the electrical grid and emissions of greenhouse gases, and requiring that "new and renovated facilities use the most recent available climate data when design decisions are made."³ While this plan was a positive step, the threats posed by climate change to VA infrastructure have not diminished since 2014, and a plan that reflects the current state of climate risks is both appropriate and necessary.

Some VA facilities have recently been recognized for operations that contribute to a more sustainable environment.⁴ However, these accolades appear to be the exception, not the rule, and do not appear to reflect an agency-wide effort by the VA to adapt its facilities to climate risks: Recent statements by the VA reveal relatively piecemeal efforts to adapt VA infrastructure to climate risks. For example, the VA's 2018 "Strategic Sustainability Performance Plan" discussed agency efforts to operate environmentally sustainable buildings, reduce energy and water use, and increase the use of renewable energy through contracts and other measures.⁵ However, this plan does not discuss adapting to climate change or extreme weather—it only has a brief mention of "[i]mproving energy resilience and reliability."⁶ In addition, the VA's most recent "Sustainable Design Manual" (revised August 18, 2017) discusses energy efficient designs of VA facilities but, in contrast to its 2014 version,⁷ contains no discussion of the importance of designing those facilities to be resilient to climate change or extreme weather events.⁸

Natural disasters and extreme weather events have adversely affected VA infrastructure and operations at facilities across the country in recent years, including in Louisiana,⁹ Texas,¹⁰

³ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "Climate Change Adaptation Plan," June 2014, <https://www.energy.va.gov/docs/VAccap2014.pdf>.

⁴ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "Minneapolis VA Recognized for Environmental Excellence," press release, May 22, 2017, https://www.minneapolis.va.gov/pressreleases/170522_Minneapolis_PR_Environmental_Award.asp; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "St. Cloud VA HC Awarded Top Honor for Leadership in Health Care Sustainability," press release, April 17, 2018, https://www.stcloud.va.gov/pressreleases/St_CLOUD_VA_HCS_AWARDED_TOP_HONOR_FOR_LEADERSHIP_IN_HEALTH_CARE_SUSTAINABILITY_2018.asp.

⁵ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "2018 Sustainability Report and Implementation Plan," <https://www.sustainability.gov/pdfs/va-2018-sustainability-plan.pdf>.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "Sustainable Design Manual," May 2014, <https://www.cfm.va.gov/ti/sustain/dmSustain201405.pdf>.

⁸ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "Sustainable Design Manual," August 18, 2017, <https://www.cfm.va.gov/ti/sustain/dmSustain.pdf>.

⁹ U.S. Climate Resilience Toolkit, "After Katrina, Health Care Facility's Infrastructure Planned to Withstand Future Flooding," February 15, 2018, <https://toolkit.climate.gov/case-studies/after-katrina-health-care-facilitys-infrastructure-planned-withstand-future-flooding>.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Steve Goetsch, "South Texas VA works to get Victoria Clinic opened," September 5, 2017, https://www.southtexas.va.gov/features/South_Texas_VA_works_to_get_Victoria_Clinic_opened.asp.

New York,¹¹ Florida, Georgia, and Alabama,¹² North Carolina,¹³ Virginia,¹⁴ Arizona,¹⁵ Pennsylvania,¹⁶ Oklahoma,¹⁷ and Puerto Rico.¹⁸ Notably, in North Carolina, “three clinics and two veteran counseling centers located elsewhere in the state were closed” due to flooding in the aftermath of Hurricane Florence.¹⁹ In Arizona, “[d]ozens of patients were moved, new-patient admissions was canceled and some medical procedures were postponed after a monsoon storm” in 2015.²⁰ And in Puerto Rico, where “[a]pproximately 9,000 high-risk veterans, who may be bedridden, live with severe post-traumatic stress disorder or require life-saving treatments such as dialysis and insulin shots,” an investigation by the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee found serious problems with the San Juan VA Medical Center in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria. Particularly worrying is the finding that VA officials did not know how to access supplies of emergency prescriptions and failed to maintain communication with veterans at risk of being

¹¹ Modern Healthcare, Melanie Evans, “VA reopens hospital damaged by superstorm Sandy,” May 21, 2013, <https://www.modernhealthcare.com/article/20130521/NEWS/305219966/va-reopens-hospital-damaged-by-superstorm-sandy>; U.S. Climate Resilience Toolkit, “After Katrina, Health Care Facility’s Infrastructure Planned to Withstand Future Flooding,” February 15, 2018, <https://toolkit.climate.gov/case-studies/after-katrina-health-care-facilitys-infrastructure-planned-withstand-future-flooding>.

¹² Stars and Stripes, Corey Dickstein and Caitlin Kenney, “Tyndall AFB leveled by Hurricane Michael as most other installations avoid damage,” October 11, 2018, <https://www.stripes.com/tyndall-afb-leveled-by-hurricane-michael-as-most-other-installations-avoid-major-damage-1.551072>.

¹³ Stars and Stripes, Nikki Wentling, “In North Carolina, flooding from Florence closes VA clinics, counseling centers, cemeteries,” September 18, 2018, <https://www.stripes.com/news/in-north-carolina-flooding-from-florence-closes-va-clinics-counseling-centers-cemeteries-1.548144>; Military Times, Leo Shane III, “As floodwaters recede, VA works to reopen locations hit by Hurricane Florence,” September 19, 2018, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/2018/09/19/as-floodwaters-recede-va-works-to-reopen-locations-hit-by-hurricane-florence/>.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ USA Today, “Storm damages beleaguered Phoenix VA hospital,” September 3, 2015, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/09/03/storm-damages-beleaguered-phoenix-va-hospital/71626564/>.

¹⁶ 69News, Julia Rose, “Flood damages forces temporary relocation of Berks VA office,” May 7, 2019, <https://www.wfmz.com/news/berks/flood-damage-forces-berks-co-department-of-veterans-affairs-to-temporarily-relocate/1075866039>.

¹⁷ NewsOn6, “Widespread Storm Damage Reported In Muskogee,” May 18, 2017, <https://www.news9.com/story/35467955/widespread-storm-damage-reported-in-muskogee>; Muskogee Phoenix, Nathan Schaeffer, “Flood warnings close VA clinics,” May 23, 2019, https://www.muskogee phoenix.com/news/flood-warnings-close-va-clinics/article_4895e31b-4bc8-594c-9aec-3ad4237de32b.html.

¹⁸ Army Times, Leo Shane III, “Puerto Rico’s VA hospital weathers Hurricane Maria, but challenges loom,” September 22, 2017, <https://www.armytimes.com/veterans/2017/09/22/puerto-ricos-va-hospital-weather-hurricane-maria-but-challenges-loom/>; NBC News, Nicole Acevedo, “Puerto Rico isn’t ready to care for veterans in a hurricane, House committee warns,” July 4, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/puerto-rico-isn-t-ready-care-veterans-hurricane-house-committee-n1026336>; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Carlos A. Cruz and Arleen Vera, “Hurricane Maria: Healthcare Resiliency Amidst a Major Natural Disaster,” April 4, 2018, https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2018-04/documents/va_caribe_fgc_4-18-18.pdf.

¹⁹ Stars and Stripes, Nikki Wentling, “In North Carolina, flooding from Florence closes VA clinics, counseling centers, cemeteries,” September 18, 2018, <https://www.stripes.com/news/in-north-carolina-flooding-from-florence-closes-va-clinics-counseling-centers-cemeteries-1.548144>.

²⁰ USA Today, “Storm damages beleaguered Phoenix VA hospital,” September 3, 2015, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/09/03/storm-damages-beleaguered-phoenix-va-hospital/71626564/>.

stranded during a natural disaster.²¹ These events demonstrate that storms and other natural disasters can have devastating impacts on the VA's mission to deliver high quality services to veterans, strain agency resources, and damage medical centers and other critical infrastructure that veterans rely on for timely care.

The VA is the second largest agency in the federal government, providing care to approximately 20 million veterans at more than 140 hospitals and 1,200 outpatient clinics across America, in addition to administering financial benefits and memorial services.²² The VA, like all federal agencies, has finite resources and must balance competing budget priorities. However, those priorities must include adapting VA infrastructure and operations to climate risks.

Strengthening the VA's resilience to climate change is consistent with the agency's mission to deliver timely, high-quality care and benefits to America's veterans. Similarly, the Department of Defense (DoD) recognizes the importance of climate resilience, observing in a recent report that "[t]he Department considers climate resilience in the installation planning and basing processes to include impacts on built and natural infrastructure" and "[t]o ensure that DoD facilities better withstand flooding and severe weather events, DoD makes appropriate changes to installation master planning, design and construction standards."²³ If our soldiers, sailors, Airmen, and Marines can benefit from a more climate resilient Defense Department, then our veterans can benefit from a more climate resilient VA.

The VA will continue to face challenges to its ability to fulfill this mission in the absence of an effective Climate Change Adaptation Plan. Given that climate risks have affected, and will continue to affect, the VA's mission, infrastructure, and operations, we ask that you provide answers to the following questions about the VA's climate change readiness by no later than November 1, 2019:

1. What analyses have VA officials or interagency experts done since 2014 regarding the impact of climate change on the agency's ability to fulfill its mission to serve the needs of veterans?
 - a. What analyses or estimates have VA officials or interagency experts conducted regarding the impact of climate change on veterans' health? What did these analyses or estimates show? Specifically, what analyses or estimates have VA officials or interagency experts conducted regarding the impact of climate change on VA infrastructure and facilities? What did these analyses or estimates show?
2. What methodology is the VA currently employing to assess the threats posed by climate change to its mission and infrastructure?

²¹ NBC News, Nicole Acevedo, "Puerto Rico isn't ready to care for veterans in a hurricane, House committee warns," July 4, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/puerto-rico-isn-t-ready-care-veterans-hurricane-house-committee-n1026336>.

²² U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "Agency Financial Report, Fiscal Year 2018," <https://www.va.gov/finance/docs/afr/2018VAafrFullWeb.pdf>.

²³ U.S. Department of Defense, "Report on Effects of a Changing Climate to the Department of Defense," January 10, 2019, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jan/29/2002084200/-1/-1/1/CLIMATE-CHANGE-REPORT-2019.PDF>.

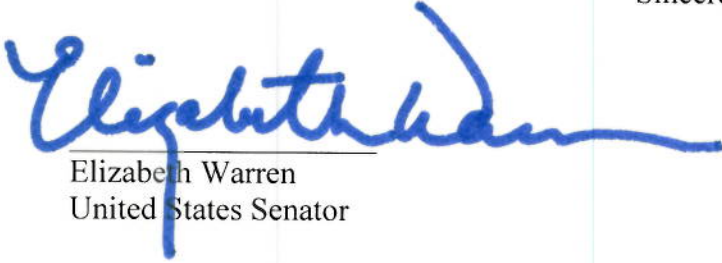
- a. In particular, how, if at all, does the VA incorporate climate assessments by state, local, tribal governments, as well as and nongovernmental agencies, into its analyses of and adaptation to climate risks?
3. Does the VA currently have a comprehensive climate change adaptation plan? If yes, does the VA plan to make it public? If not, why does the VA not have such a plan currently, given that the agency previously issued one in 2014?
4. What steps is the VA currently taking to adapt its mission and infrastructure to mitigate climate change risks?
5. How, if at all, does the VA incorporate climate impacts on veterans' health in decisions concerning major and minor capital acquisition and infrastructure development?
6. Does the VA currently assess, in a list or other format, the medical centers and other facilities that are most vulnerable to climate change risks? If so, please provide a copy of this list. If not, is that an assessment the VA would be willing to perform on an annual or biennial basis going forward?
7. Please provide an estimate of the financial costs incurred by the VA in the previous fiscal year (i.e., FY 2018) from damage to infrastructure and operations resulting from extreme weather or other related climate change-related risks, including, but not limited to, floods, wind, and extreme temperatures.
8. How, if at all, does the VA work with the General Services Administration (GSA) to incorporate climate risks into the consideration of VA capital lease arrangements?
9. How, if at all, does the VA work with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to incorporate climate risks into the siting, design, and construction of major construction projects exceeding \$100 million?
10. On November 1, 2013, President Obama issued Executive Order (EO) 13653, which, among a variety of measures, required federal agencies to "develop or continue to develop, implement, and update comprehensive plans that integrate consideration of climate change into agency operations and overall mission objectives" and included the Department of Veterans Affairs in a multi-agency council whose mission involved "work[ing] across agencies and offices, and in partnership with State, local, and tribal governments ... academic and research institutions, and the private and nonprofit sectors" to strengthen resilience to climate change.²⁴ On March 28, 2017, the Trump

²⁴ The White House, "Executive Order -- Preparing the United States for the Impacts of Climate Change," November 1, 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/11/01/executive-order-preparing-united-states-impacts-climate-change>.

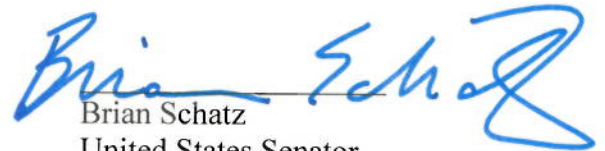
Administration revoked this Executive Order.²⁵ How has the President's revocation of the Obama-era Executive Order affected the VA's progress in adapting to climate change?

Thank you for your attention to this important matter and for your continued support of our veterans and their families whom we all serve.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Brian Schatz
United States Senator
Ranking Member,
Subcommittee on Military
Construction, Veterans
Affairs, and Related
Agencies

²⁵ The White House, "Presidential Executive Order on Promoting Energy Independence and Economic Growth," March 28, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/presidential-executive-order-promoting-energy-independence-economic-growth/>.