

United States Senate

September 6, 2020

The Honorable Robert Wilkie
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Secretary Wilkie:

I write to request immediate assistance from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to stop the spread of the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, sickening veterans and staff at the Yukio Okutsu Veterans State Home in Hilo, Hawaii.

The outbreak we are seeing at the state veterans home is heartbreaking. As of today, 46 residents and 18 members of staff have tested positive for COVID-19 and at least five residents have lost their lives due to the virus. It is clear that we are in a race against time and must commit as many resources as possible stop the spread of this virus before more veterans and staff become sick and die. While I appreciate the support that the VA Pacific Island Health Care System in Honolulu has provided, including with the delivery of personal protective equipment (PPE), VA can and must do more to reduce the risk to and suffering of the veterans and caregivers in the state home.

As the largest integrated healthcare system in the country, VA is specifically well positioned to provide expertise to the facility to ensure it is following infection control best practices that will help arrest this outbreak. Under Section 20005 of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act, P.L. 116-136), Congress authorized VA “to provide to State homes medicines, personal protective equipment, medical supplies, and any other equipment, supplies, and assistance available to the Department of Veterans Affairs.”

I urge VA to use the CARES Act authority to immediately deploy infection control experts and other healthcare professionals to the Yukio Okutsu Veterans State Home. VA’s experts should work with the facility to provide technical assistance to ensure it is following best practices for droplet precautions, isolation protocols for both residents and staff, and use of PPE; providing adequate staff capacity to serve the facility’s veterans during this outbreak; and other measures that will protect the standard of care for veterans and those caregivers working in the state home.

Thank you for your prompt consideration of this request for assistance to stop the spread of COVID-19 at the Yukio Okutsu Veterans State Home. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or concerns about this request.

Sincerely,



BRIAN SCHATZ
U.S. Senator

Cc: The Honorable David Y. Ige, governor of the State of Hawaii