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North Country veterans face limited access, long travel distances for medical care

April 17, 2012

WASHINGTON, D.C. – As the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) undergoes its regular process for establishing Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs) around the country, U.S. Senators Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH) and Kelly Ayotte (R-NH), along with Rep. Charles F. Bass (R-NH), wrote today to VA Secretary Eric Shinseki urging him to consider Coos County as a potential location. In the letter, the delegation members underscored the difficulty that North Country veterans currently face in accessing medical care. Because the North Country lacks a CBOC, veterans residing there must travel two to three hours to reach the nearest clinics in Littleton and Conway. For more specialized care, they currently must travel to the VA Medical Center in White River Junction, Vermont.

"While Coos County's population is small compared to the area covered, there are some 3,605 veterans in New Hampshire's North Country, of which 1,821 are in the VA medical system," they wrote. "Given the substantial obstacles veterans in the North Country confront in getting the VA care they have earned, we ask the VA to consider whether the unique circumstances in Coos County warrant the establishment of a CBOC."

New Hampshire is one of the few states without a full-service VA hospital, forcing far too many veterans to travel significant distances and out of state to receive care. Senators Shaheen and Ayotte, both members of the Senate Armed Services Committee, are cosponsoring legislation that would require the VA to provide for a full-service VA hospital or equivalent contracted services in-state. Congressman Bass is a cosponsor of similar legislation in the House.

SHAHEEN/AYOTTE/BASS LETTER TO VA:

Thank you for your commitment and dedication to serving our nation's veterans. In New Hampshire, veterans represent approximately ten percent of the population, and we have worked closely together to ensure that our veterans have the care they need and deserve.

As the VA undergoes its regular process for determining where to establish Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs) around the country, we ask you to consider Colebrook, New Hampshire. Colebrook is located in rural Coos County, which occupies the largest area of any New Hampshire county.

While Coos County's population is small compared to the area covered, there are some 3,605 veterans in New Hampshire's "north country," of which 1,821 are in the VA medical system. Many of these veterans are World War II, Korean War, or Vietnam era veterans. Currently, these veterans—many of whom are elderly—must travel two to three hours to the White River Junction, Vermont, VA Medical Center (VAMC), which has jurisdiction over Coos County. The nearest CBOCs are in Littleton and Conway, New Hampshire—each approximately two hours away. During inclement weather and winter driving conditions, the driving times are much longer

and more hazardous.

Given the substantial obstacles veterans in our "north country" confront in getting the VA care they have earned, we ask the VA to consider whether the unique circumstances in Coos County warrant the establishment of a CBOC. We urge you to give this matter your highest priority, and we look forward to working with you to ensure all of the veterans of New Hampshire have access to the health care they deserve.

Sincerely,

U.S. Senator Jeanne Shaheen

U.S. Senator Kelly Ayotte

U.S. Rep. Charles F. Bass

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