

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 22, 2020

The Honorable Robert Wilkie
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Wilkie,

I write regarding recent changes to the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) debt collection practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. I appreciate your decision to stop collection on newly established veteran debt and give veterans the option to extend repayment terms during the COVID-19 public health emergency. I am also pleased that this pause in debt collection includes freezing any copayments normally associated with the receipt of VA health care. However, I have heard from veterans in New Hampshire who are concerned that they will face insurmountable medical bills when the VA lifts the moratorium on debt collection, currently set to expire on December 31, 2020. Accordingly, I request that you make every attempt possible to inform veterans of when collections will continue and their options either to continue making payments or request financial hardship assistance from the VA.

It is my understanding that while the VA has stopped sending monthly copay billing statements, veterans may continue making payments on their accounts by telephone or online if they so choose. I ask that you use every means possible to ensure that veterans are aware of this repayment option during the COVID-19 pandemic. I am concerned that veterans who are unaware of their ability to continue making payments will face insurmountable bills when the VA begins collecting deferred payments in 2021. I also understand that veterans can request financial hardship assistance or an exemption from future copayments. The VA must ensure that those veterans who are eligible for this assistance are aware of these options during the pandemic and when payments on outstanding debt resume.

My office has heard from Granite Staters who were unaware of these debt collection changes until they failed to receive an expected copayment bill and were forced to inquire about payment options at the Manchester Veterans Affairs Medical Center. Prompt notification of these changes to veterans through electronic communication, mail or telephone would help to reduce uncertainty and allow veterans to choose their preferred repayment method. It would also make it less likely that veterans are unexpectedly saddled with exorbitant debt obligations when the VA restarts collections.

The VA has made the correct choice in providing financial relief for veterans during these uncertain and trying times. However, we must ensure that veterans are fully aware of their future payment obligations and able to pursue options to mitigate their financial burdens. The federal

government must continue to work in every way possible to mitigate the impact of this pandemic on those who have selflessly served our nation.

I thank you for your attention to this issue, and your continued service to our nation's veterans.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jeanne Shaheen". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letter of each word being capitalized and larger than the others.

Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator