

## United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 26, 2016

The Honorable Robert McDonald  
Secretary of Veterans Affairs  
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue Northwest  
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary McDonald,

I am writing you today in regards to the pending grant application submitted by the Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs (FDVA) to the Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) pursuant to funding construction of the Ardie R. Copas State Veterans' Nursing Home in Port St. Lucie, Florida. I write in support of FDVA's resubmitted application and urge your Department to prioritize necessary funding; however, I remain concerned over the statutory and regulatory barriers inhibiting the construction and funding of this new VA facility.

As you may know, Florida is the proud home of our nation's third largest veterans community, with a growing population of over one million veterans. According to FDVA statistics, more than 700,000 veterans in Florida are age 65 or older. While demand for nursing homes will continue to uniquely impact my State, there is not a single issue impacting veterans nationally that does not ultimately impact veterans in Florida.

With dramatic improvements in medical technology and pharmaceutical innovation, our veterans are surviving battlefield injuries and accidents that would have been fatal just years ago. While this reality has provided them and their families with a second chance at life, it has also undeniably come with excruciating challenges over the remainder of their lives. We owe it to our veterans to ensure they are being provided the highest quality health care available, including nursing home care.

Over the last several years, St. Lucie County and the State of Florida, in coordination with the FDVA, has devoted significant personnel and financial resources to construct a veterans nursing home in the community of Tradition, Florida. Unfortunately, as a result of needless red tape and bureaucratic hurdles put in place by the VA, construction of the facility has yet to break ground. Worse, the proposed site of the nursing home is in an area of demonstrated and urgent need of resources to care for its rapidly growing veteran community.

According to the TC Palm newspaper:

*In June 2011, about the same time the Florida Department of Veterans Affairs applied for federal grants to build four veterans nursing homes in the Sunshine State, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs released its "Design Guide for Community Living Centers."*

*Unlike a conventional veterans nursing home, which state VA officials had planned to build in Tradition, "community living centers" are more compartmentalized. They consist of buildings with 10 to 12 single-resident bedrooms, " with full baths, and all the common areas necessary to accommodate the residents in a residential environment," according to the guide.*

*Community living centers also are more expensive to build, staff and maintain. Under the new model, the construction cost for the Tradition facility jumped from \$39 million to \$58.9 million.*

*Here's the bureaucratic twist: The design guide clearly states: "This volume is meant to be a guide, not a code or regulation." At some point, however, the guidelines became requirements. ...*

*When state VA officials failed to receive assurances from the federal VA that the latter would cover 65 percent of the construction cost to build a conventional veterans nursing home in Tradition, state officials withdrew their original application and reapplied for a larger grant to build a community living center.*

Because the FDVA had to reapply for this larger grant, there is a concern among local, state and federal officials, including me, that the nursing home project will be delayed by at least a year and that Florida could lose its original position in the federal grants pipeline to build this facility.

As such, I look forward to your prompt consideration of FDVA's grant application and respectfully request an appraisal of any related developments. Additionally, I urge your personal involvement in making sure that this nursing home can be completed in a timely manner, and in honoring our veterans by enabling those who are eligible and qualify to use this facility to receive the care they have earned.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Marco Rubio', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Marco Rubio  
United States Senator