



THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS  
WASHINGTON

April 23, 2008

The Honorable Kay Bailey Hutchison  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs  
and Related Agencies  
Committee on Appropriations  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Hutchison:

Thank you for sharing your concerns regarding the recent suicides and the quality of psychiatric care at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) North Texas Health Care System in Dallas, Texas. The Office of the Medical Inspector arrived at the Dallas VA Medical Center on April 16, 2008, to investigate and review mental health operations following the recent inpatient suicide and concluded their review on April 17, 2008. The Medical Inspector will report their findings to senior VHA leadership and then prepare a formal report with specific recommendations for improvement. Once the report has been reviewed by VA leadership, it will be given to the Dallas VA Medical Center Leadership with a charge to correct the identified deficiencies within 30 days.

A team has been charged from the Office of Mental Health Services to visit the facility the week of April 21 to review and assist in resolving issues surrounding enhancing quality mental health care and improving suicide prevention efforts. The scope of the site visit will include a focused review of the mental health program including assessing the efficacy of suicide risk assessment tools, stratification of risk, and inter-rater reliability.

Our target goal is to improve services and processes throughout the continuum of mental health services for reducing suicide risk, with particular emphasis on inpatient mental health units. In addition, the review will include an assessment of the physical facility and hazards that represent potential suicide risks and coordination of care for patients at various risk levels. In the interim, the Medical Inspector and the team from the Office of Mental Health Services are available to brief you and your staff on preliminary findings during the week of April 28, 2008.

VA takes its obligation to honor and serve America's veterans very seriously. Thank you for your continuing interest and support of our Nation's veterans.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "James B. Peake", is positioned below the text "Sincerely yours,". The signature is stylized and cursive.

James B. Peake, M.D.