



Jared Golden
Congress of the United States
2nd District of Maine

March 2, 2022

Senator Craig Hickman
Senate Chair
Committee on Veterans and Legal
Affairs
100 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333

Representative Chris Caiazzo
House Chair
Committee on Veterans and Legal
Affairs
100 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333

Dear Senator Hickman, Representative Caiazzo, and Distinguished Members of the Committee:

I write to share my strong support for L.D. 2001, “An Act To An Act To Fund and Support the Veterans Homes in Caribou and Machias and Require Legislative Approval for the Establishment and Closure of Veterans Homes,” introduced by Senator Troy Jackson.

As you know, the Maine Veterans Homes (MVH) were established by the State Legislature in 1977 to provide long-term care and services to Maine veterans and their families. Central to its mandate is a profound moral obligation to promote the well-being and dignity of Mainers who have served our nation, often in times of war and at great cost. I strongly suspect that the people of Maine agree that we should take every step possible to be there for our veterans when they need us most. If the facilities in Caribou and Machias are operating in the financial red, the last option should be closure – instead we must search for every other possible solution.

You may hear it said that because MVH is a nonprofit, the Maine Legislature has limited opportunity to direct its operational decisions. As members of this committee, you know that is not accurate – MVH has certainly come before the legislature seeking assistance in the past, and it is statutorily required to provide annual updates to your committee.

One example of such assistance occurred in 2016, when Senator Roger Katz sponsored L.D. 1524, a bill to lift the statutory cap on revenue bonding authority for MVH from \$15 million to \$50 million so that MVH could pursue federal funds to build a new state-of-the-art home in Augusta. Senator Pouliot, at the time a House member, cosponsored the bill, as did I. There may be some discussion of that bill before your committee today, with the suggestion that it created the conditions for the proposed closures today. I strongly disagree, and urge committee members to go back and look at the testimony on the bill, all of which is in support of the bill and focused on the future growth of MVH. The supportive testimony also mentions the bill’s inclusion of routine “technical changes” to the statute, including the removal of references to the specific veterans homes to be operated in the state by MVH. These changes were repeatedly affirmed as technical in nature, and there was no testimony indicating the possible closure of any MVH homes in the future.

L.D. 1524 received only supportive testimony, passed the House and Senate unanimously, and was signed into law by former Governor Paul LePage. I can assure you that it was not the intention of Senator Katz, then-Representative Pouliot, myself, the 125th Legislature, or then-Governor LePage to give MVH the authority to close a Maine Veterans Home should it choose in the future. The Maine Legislature supported the bill so that MVH could make an investment in a new home in Augusta, period.

I am disappointed that the board considers closing any veterans home facility a responsible option. This is unquestionably the wrong thing to do. The Maine Legislature created MVH to provide quality care to our veterans, and operating these homes has never been simply about the cost. I believe the board should reconsider its decision and instead seek financial support from you, the legislature, and the entire congressional delegation. I am confident that we all want to see the facilities in Caribou and Machias remain open and that we all want MVH to be successful in the future. There is surely a solution to be found.

The most important provision of Senator Jackson's bill would establish a requirement for the board to maintain all of its current facilities. Critically, the bill also proposes some financial support to ensure that the veterans in these homes receive safe and quality care. In the long run, I am confident that a longer-term financial plan can be identified, and I will fully support any effort to contribute federal support that would aid in MVH's future operations.

Time and again, members of Maine's congressional delegation have been responsive to the needs of MVH when asked, and so has the Maine Legislature. At this moment I believe the closure decisions must be rejected for the good of our veterans living and receiving care in these facilities and that going forward a spirit of cooperation with the MVH board must accompany such a decision in search of financial support and regulatory relief for these facilities.

While Maine has been unique in adopting the independent, not-for-profit organizational structure to support aging veterans and their families, it may be time to revisit whether that model merits a reimagining. If it becomes apparent that the MVH Board continues to push back, the legislature may wish to consider assuming greater responsibility for the veterans homes in the same way that so many other states have chosen to do. Although I understand well the challenges facing the state in taking on new financial commitments, an investment to keep the Caribou and Machias facilities in service and to prevent the displacement of more than 80 veterans and their family members would be a worthy commitment to make to those who bravely served our country. I strongly support Senator Jackson's legislation to protect and shore up these vital facilities.

Respectfully,



Jared Golden
Member of Congress