

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

December 19, 2008

The Honorable James B. Peake  
Secretary of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Peake:

We are contacting you today to express our serious concerns regarding the possible closing of the VA's Brain Imaging and Recovery Laboratory (BIRL) in Austin, Texas. This facility, managed by the Central Texas VA Health Care System, was created specifically to improve diagnosis and treatment methods for Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). We fully support the intended mission of the BIRL and its research efforts, which serve those brave Americans who are injured in the defense of our nation.

It is our understanding that the VA is now considering closing the BIRL and terminating the research programs conducted there. We believe this would be a mistake and would seriously hinder the ability to better understand TBI, a signature wound of our nation's military campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The BIRL is the only program of its kind in Texas and one of a small number in the U.S. It benefits from collaborative academic ties with the University of Texas at Austin, one of the leading academic neuroscience research centers in the world, and it utilizes one of the most advanced research MRI scanners in the country. Further, its proximity to large Texas military installations – including Ft. Hood, the Army's largest installation by population – affords it easy access to large concentrations of combat veterans who would benefit from its efforts.

According to a recent study, an estimated 320,000 troops have experienced a probable traumatic brain injury (TBI) during deployment, and the numbers continue to grow.

Without proper diagnosis and treatment, TBI can have long-term destructive consequences for our combat veterans. Failure to provide prompt and quality treatment can lead to increased risk of suicide, family problems, and often abuse and homelessness. Without question, these men and women need and deserve improved TBI diagnosis and treatment. TBI is distinctly different from other "invisible wounds" of war such as post-traumatic stress disorder, which also afflicts our combat veterans at an alarming rate. TBI diagnosis is difficult because the underlying pathology is not well understood; more research is needed now.

We strongly oppose the closure of the BIRL and urge you to consider the effect closing the BIRL would have on our nation's TBI research and the effort to improve health care for our wounded warriors who suffer from this complicated disorder.

We look forward to your prompt response on this matter. Thank you for your dedicated service on behalf of America's veterans and your steadfast leadership of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

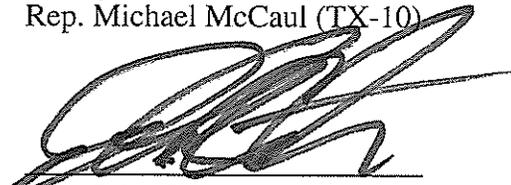
Sincerely,



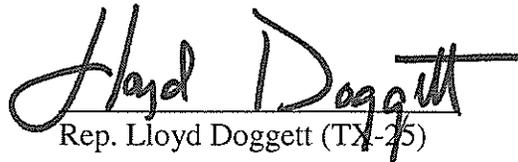
Rep. Michael McCaul (TX-10)



Rep. Lamar Smith (TX-21)



Rep. John Carter (TX-31)



Rep. Lloyd Doggett (TX-25)