



Hospital will fight to keep VA clinic

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TONASKET — Tonasket hospital officials say they're planning to fight to keep its VA clinic open, and they're asking veterans and others in the community to help.

Last week, North Valley Hospital officials confirmed that its VA clinic — which has lost nearly \$2 million since it opened in 2010 — is scheduled to close on July 31, after an attempt to renegotiate its contract with the Veterans Administration failed.

In a news release on Friday, hospital officials said they're pushing to get officials from the VA hospital in Spokane back to the negotiating table, and asked veterans and residents to contact city, state and federal representatives to express their concerns about the plans to close it.

"We are screaming out for help," said Mikaela Marion, the hospital's public relations and marketing coordinator.

She said the clinic serves more than 850 veterans, many of them disabled, and it will be a hardship to travel to the nearest VA clinics in Wenatchee or Spokane.

"Our facility is dedicated to finding a solution for our veterans. We do care for them, very deeply," she said. "People are thinking we're trying to close this down, but it's the opposite. We're doing everything we can to keep them here."

Last week, Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash. — after hearing from constituents — wrote a letter to U.S. Secretary of Veterans Affairs David Shulkin asking him to step in on behalf of veterans and renew the contract.

She wrote that, in addition to a two-hour drive to Wenatchee's VA clinic, or a three-hour drive to Spokane's, there is nearly a month-long wait for new primary care patients at the Spokane clinic.

"I strongly believe closing the health clinic in Tonasket would be a step backward from fulfilling our country's promise to provide the best possible care to the men and women who served our country, and as a voice for the 600,000 veterans in Washington state, I urge you to intervene," she wrote in her May 3 letter.

She also noted that, in 2015, the VA closed clinics in Republic and Colville, eliminating access for hundreds of veterans. "These actions were taken with the promise those veterans could seek care at Tonasket," she wrote. She also pointed to other cutbacks or shortcomings at other VA clinics in the state.

In its news release, hospital CEO Ron O'Halloran said, "Our goal is to continue care for our veterans with uninterrupted service here at North Valley Hospital. We are exploring alternatives that will work for our community and our veterans."

Bret Bowers, public affairs officer for the Mann-Grandstaff VA Medical Center in Spokane, said in an email last week that negotiations were not ongoing. On Friday, he said the VA had no further comment at this time.