

December 7, 2017

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
S-230, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate
S-221, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Majority Leader McConnell and Minority Leader Schumer:

On behalf of the millions of veterans we represent, and all veterans who use the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health care system, we write to urge you to take whatever actions are necessary to swiftly bring to the floor and pass S. 2193, the *Caring for Our Veterans Act of 2017*, bipartisan legislation approved by the Committee on Veterans' Affairs last week to improve and modernize the care America provides her veterans.

The brave men and women who have worn our nation's uniform must have timely access to high-quality, comprehensive and veteran-centric care. The majority of our members rely on VA to provide such care, but understand that VA must turn to private sector partners when it is not able to reasonably meet the demand for care in its health system. This legislation would build on current community care programs by putting an end to arbitrary standards for when veterans may receive community care and by consolidating the disparate community care programs into one program. In doing so, this legislation would remove confusion over when and how veterans can access community care doctors, and ensure VA remains the coordinator of care for veterans regardless if care is delivered at VA medical facilities or through community care providers.

We are pleased this legislation would empower veterans and their health care providers to work together to determine when and where veterans should receive care based on access and quality measures. This approach is also very similar to VA's Veterans Coordinated Access and Rewarding Experiences (CARE) plan, which was developed with direct input from major veterans service organizations. The bill would ensure certain community care doctors are trained to provide veteran-centric care that abides by VA's best practices and clinical practice guidelines. Importantly, this legislation would ensure VA does not rush implementation of the new and improved community care program by funding the current Choice Program through the end of fiscal year 2018. It also consolidates future community care funding within one discretionary appropriations account to end the current dual-funding process which has led to numerous community care funding shortfalls and veterans being denied access to community care.

The legislation would also give veterans the opportunity to access walk-in clinics throughout the country to fill the gap between costly emergency room care and waiting for ambulatory care. However, it does not protect a covered veteran from paying out-of-pocket fees for service-connected illnesses and injuries. We call on Congress to make certain veterans are not charged copayments for illnesses and injuries related to their military service.

Additionally, this legislation includes important provisions to strengthen the VA health care system and expand its ability to provide direct care to our nation's veterans, while preserving VA foundational services not accommodated in the private sector. It would expand and improve VA's graduate medical education, loan repayment and residency programs to ensure VA is able to recruit and retain high-quality health care professionals. It also includes much-needed supplemental appropriations to expand and improve VA's capital infrastructure and authorizes VA health care professionals to practice telemedicine across state lines to ensure veterans, particularly those in rural settings, have convenient access to virtual health care.

Finally, we strongly support Title III of the legislation which would extend VA's comprehensive caregiver benefits to veterans of all eras. The legislation would finally correct a serious inequity between veterans who served before September 11, 2001 and their post-9/11 comrades, who believe the caregivers of pre-9/11 veterans must have access to comprehensive caregiver services that are fully funded and properly managed. As this legislation moves through the Senate and into conference discussions with the House, we urge you to ensure this critical caregiver equity provision remains part of the final legislation.

We ask that you work together to secure Senate passage of the *Caring for Our Veterans Act of 2017* before the end of the year so the House and Senate Committees on Veterans' Affairs are given enough time to reach a final agreement before funding for the Choice Program is depleted again. Failure to do so would deprive veterans access to the high-quality care they have earned and deserve. We look forward to working with you and all members of the Senate to ensure swift passage of this important, bipartisan and comprehensive legislation.

Sincerely,



Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States




DAV (Disabled American Veterans)



Paralyzed Veterans of America



Military Officers Association of America



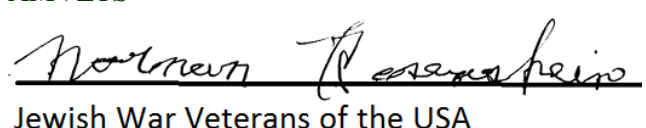
The American Legion



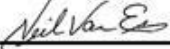
Vietnam Veterans of America



AMVETS



Jewish War Veterans of the USA


Military Order of the Purple Heart


US Army Warrant Officers Assn.


Fleet Reserve Association


AMSUS, the Society of Federal Health Professionals


Air Force Association


USCG Chief Petty Officers Assn.


Reserve Officers Association


The Military Chaplains Assn. of the USA


Army Aviation Association of America

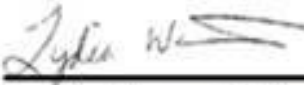

The Retired Enlisted Assn.



Air Force Sergeants Association

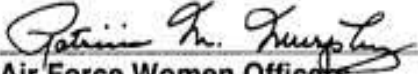

National Military Family Association


Naval Enlisted Reserve Assn.


Wounded Warrior Project


Service Women's Action Network


Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America


Air Force Women Officers
Associated


CWOA, US Coast Guard

cc. Members of the United States Senate