

December 21, 2017

The Honorable Thad Cochran, Chairman
Senate Committee on Appropriations
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patrick Leahy, Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Appropriations
Washington, DC 20510

Honorable Rodney Frelinghuysen, Chairman
House Committee on Appropriations
Washington, DC 20515

Honorable Nita Lowey, Ranking Member
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Cochran, Ranking Member Leahy, Chairman Frelinghuysen and Ranking Member Lowey:

We write to call on you to ensure that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) can continue to provide veterans access to the care they have earned and deserve. On December 12, 2017, Secretary of Veterans Affairs David J. Shulkin informed Congress that “without additional funding before the end of the year” for the Veterans Choice Program, VA’s ability to deliver needed health care for veterans would be dramatically impacted. The Choice program was created in 2014 as an emergency program to provide community care to veterans who were unable to receive timely care from VA due to capacity constraints. In the past three years, the Choice Program has provided care to more than one million veterans, but this important program will be required to end if VA does not receive additional funding before the end of the year.

On behalf of the brave men and women who have worn our Nation’s uniform, we urge you to ensure any Continuing Resolution or appropriations measure considered by Congress before the end of the year include sufficient new appropriations to continue the Choice program as well as new appropriations to increase VA’s capacity to deliver care to veterans. Doing so would provide the Senate and House Committees on Veterans’ Affairs enough time to reach an agreement on a comprehensive and permanent fix to the ailing Choice program.

The legislation creating the Choice program also included funding to expand VA’s capacity through investments in physical infrastructure and human capital. For the same reasons, when the Choice program required supplemental funding earlier this year, we and other VSOs sent a letter (attached) on June 28 that not only called on Congress to “...address urgent resource shortfalls endangering VA’s medical care programs—including Choice, community care and medical services,” but also called for Congress to “...equally invest in modernizing and expanding VA’s capacity to meet rising demand for care.” Any investment in the Choice program must be met with an equal investment in VA’s ability to provide direct care.

Millions of veterans who use and rely on VA and community providers for their care, particularly those who suffered illnesses and injuries while defending our freedoms, are counting on you. With Congress currently considering legislation that may include funding for the Choice program, we again call on you to ensure not only that sufficient funding is provided to maintain continuity of care for veterans in the Choice program, but also that additional appropriations are provided to invest in and expand VA’s internal capacity to deliver care.

Respectfully,



Garry J. Augustine
Executive Director, Washington Headquarters
DAV (Disabled American Veterans)



Robert E. Wallace
Executive Director, Washington Office
Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S.



Carl Blake
Interim Executive Director
Paralyzed Veterans of America



Rick Weidman
Executive Director for Policy
and Government Affairs
Vietnam Veterans of America



Niel Van Ess
National Commander
Military Order of the Purple Heart

cc: Chairman and Ranking Members of the Senate and House Veterans’ Affairs Committees