The American Legion

OFFICE OF THE
NATIONAL COMMANDER

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July 17, 2015

Honorable Johnny Isakson, Chairman
Committee on Veterans Affairs
United States Senate
SR-412 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Chairman Isakson,

America's veterans need your help, and they need it now.

Last year's health care access scandal at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) uncovered a vast demand for health care and treatment among veterans that was not being met in a timely or convenient manner. To address this crisis, The American Legion worked closely with you to create the Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act of 2014. That legislation was designed to ensure enrolled veterans got access to the care they so desperately needed.

The response from VA was to work diligently to ensure veterans got that care through any means necessary. The American Legion and other veterans service organizations insisted there was a vast demand in the community, but nobody could have anticipated the scope of that demand. VA has provided more than 7 million new appointments this year over last year's figures, and the year is not over yet. Fee basis care in the community has rocketed up by over 40 percent to become approximately 20 percent of all VA care. VA has scrambled to get veterans seen using every tool at their disposal, but that has come with a cost.

As we approach the end of the fiscal year, VA's accounts are dangerously depleted. Reacting to the crisis, they put treating veterans above rationing care to a budget, and we cannot fault them for that. However, we must give VA the resources they need to finish out this year without any stoppage or slowdown to their delivery of health care to veterans.

There is money available in the funds allocated for the Choice program, and VA needs authorization to access those funds to keep health care flowing to veterans. That money was allocated to treat veterans in a health care emergency, and those same veterans are facing an emergency. The Choice program funds were allocated to help VA provide care when VA care was not readily available, and now more than ever we need to ensure veterans receive uninterrupted care.

The American Legion saw the Choice program as a necessary tool that would help identify critical gaps in VA healthcare. It was our intention to use the data accumulated at the conclusion of the program, to look back and audit where those emergency dollars had been spent outside the "normal course of VA business" and use that data to fortify VA's future programs and medical infrastructure needs. Already this year we are seeing the gaps in VA's funding for care and infrastructure exposed. We need to gather this information and use it to plan for a better tomorrow. But today, we need to get care to veterans, and that requires immediate action for funding.

The American Legion supports reallocating Choice funds on a limited basis for the purpose of ensuring existing VA medical services remain intact due to projected budget shortfalls. We also call on VA to provide a detailed analysis of:

A. FY 2015 VHA expenditures as compared to FY 2014 expenditures
B. Current FY 2016 and FY 2017 budget authorizations with a comparison to what would be needed based on the outcome of the Choice FY 2015 implementation experience

The American Legion is the largest Veteran Service Organization in the nation and we take our responsibility to analyze and evaluate veterans' healthcare options very seriously. As VA, Congress, and The American Legion move forward together we must ensure that American veterans are provided with the healthcare and services they have earned and were guaranteed.

Sincerely,

MICHAEL D. HELM
National Commander
The American Legion

CC: Honorable Robert McDonald, Secretary, Department of Veterans Affairs