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# United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 13, 2017

The Honorable David Shulkin  
Secretary of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue, Northwest  
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Shulkin,

We write today to express our concern about recent issues with eligibility and operations of the Caregiver Support program. We intend to expand the program to cover veterans of all eras, and to enhance the services available for veterans and their caregivers. To accomplish this, it is essential you take steps now to address concerns and strengthen the program for the future.

As you know, the Caregiver Support program, created by Congress in the Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010, provides a number of essential support services to caregivers providing for injured veterans. While VA provides essential health care services to disabled veterans, it often falls on these caregivers to provide the day to day care that injured veterans need. The training, respite, health care, living stipend, and other services are indispensable in giving caregivers the tools they need to care for their veterans, helping those veterans stay at home, out of institutions, dramatically improving their care and quality of life.

According to data provided by the Department, 72 medical centers have ratios of more than 50 caregivers per coordinator, 15 of which have more than 100 caregivers per coordinator. This data does not indicate whether the reported caregiver positions are vacant, which could increase these workloads. Further, recent reporting by NPR shows some VA medical centers drastically reduced the number of caregivers receiving support services. This includes reductions of 50 percent or more for facilities in Montana and Washington, resulting in hundreds of caregivers losing access to the benefits they depend upon to provide for their injured veterans. The problem has gotten so bad that at the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center, there were only 11 veterans with caregivers in the program after 94 percent of the enrolled veterans were removed from the program since 2014. Removing veterans from the program in order to reduce the workload or save money is inappropriate and unacceptable.

We have also been made aware of improper changes to veterans' eligibility status. Some caregivers and veterans have been removed from the program despite not having received an assessment in more than six months. Some of these veterans have been reduced from Tier 3

ratings to complete removal without the benefit of an evaluation. Additionally, veterans and their caregivers have been removed from the program for attending school in any capacity, even if they are unable to transport themselves to and from school without the assistance of a caregiver. Due to notification letters that do not adequately explain the rationale, this is often done with little or no explanation to the veteran or caregiver about the decision and why they are being forced out of the program.

We request that you provide our offices with information as to why such large numbers of family caregivers are having their access to support services revoked despite no changes in the statute governing eligibility for those services. We also request information regarding what plans VA has to ensure that individual VA facilities are not removing caregivers from the program who clearly qualify for support services. As there are clearly major discrepancies in the application of program eligibility requirements across multiple states we believe that VA must do more to clearly define eligibility requirements and evaluation procedures. Therefore, we ask that you expedite issuing national policy to set consistent standards for the program. We also request you authorize increased staff and resources for the Caregiver Program Office to ensure they have the tools necessary to oversee this complex national program. Finally, we ask that you require decision notification letters to include a detailed explanation for any change in enrollment status, and comprehensive evaluations – including the input of the caregiver – be undertaken before enrollment changes are made.


Thank you for your attention to these concerns and your work on behalf of our nation's veterans. We look forward to working with you to strengthen this critical program.

Sincerely,



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Jon Tester  
U.S. Senate



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Patty Murray  
U.S. Senate