Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

February 18, 2015

The Honorable Robert McDonald
Secretary
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary McDonald,

It has been over half a year since the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act was signed into law, yet veterans are still struggling to gain adequate healthcare. More importantly, for those of us who represent rural districts, the Veterans Choice program represented a new opportunity to address the wait time backlog for veterans. While this program aims to help veterans living in areas with limited VA access, details surrounding its implementation, and the president's recent budget, have raised some concerns.

Last week, President Obama released his Fiscal Year 2016 budget and chose to raid funding for the Veterans Choice Program that he signed into law a mere 6 months ago. The Choice program was designed to directly help eligible veterans seek care outside the Veteran Affairs (VA) network if they experience a wait time over 30 days or don't live within 40 miles of a VA clinic. As a pillar of the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act, it stood to show Americans that the VA was trying to improve and change its scandal plagued culture. Simply put, cutting funding for this program to relieve other deficit shortfalls is a step backward for those of us who supported this breakthrough legislation.

Although the President's budget is just a proposal and the VA network has improved since its widespread scandal in 2014, members of Congress are still left asking themselves many of the same questions. Fundamentally, how can we effectively care for our veterans? Basic in nature, this question sets the foundation for improvement. To answer it, several questions need to be asked regarding the programs designed to improve our veterans' lives:

- Was the VA consulted before determining cuts to funding for the Veterans Choice program?
- Are the cuts a signal by the VA that the program has been unsuccessful and will not be renewed?
- Although some veterans live within the 40 mile limit set by the VA to be eligible for the Choice Card program- roads seldom create such direct path. Shouldn't the 40 mile VA clinic proximity rule apply to actual road mileage?
- What steps are being taken to address concerns about VA facilities that are within the 40 mile limit, but do not provide the necessary medical services the veteran requires?
- How effective has the VA been in reimbursing health care providers who accept the Choice Card?

As Congress continues with its budget process in the weeks and months ahead, knowing the current state of the Choice Card program will allow members to consider appropriate funding levels. We appreciate all the work you have done on behalf of veterans and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Roger Williams
Member of Congress

Doug Collins
Member of Congress

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