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COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

ONE HUNDRED FOURTEENTH CONGRESS

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WASHINGTON, DC 20515

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February 4, 2016

The Honorable Tom Price
 Chairman, House Committee on the Budget
 Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Chris Van Hollen
 Ranking Member, House Committee on the Budget
 Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Price and Ranking Member Van Hollen:

This letter responds to your request for the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs' (HVAC) legislative agenda related to the Fiscal Year 2017 budget. You will see that the Members of the Committee will continue to pursue legislation to address the big issues that drive much of the problems at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). We will do that by building on our internal investigations as well as those by the VA Inspector General and the Government Accountability Office that have revealed significant challenges at VA.

HVAC will introduce legislation to reform VA procurement to reduce costs through increased competition and rein in the Department's under-use of FAR-compliant contracts. It is estimated that VA's non-FAR-based open market purchases totaled \$10 billion, including \$1.3 billion, in fiscal years 2013 and 2014. The Committee will work to clarify the use of health care provider agreements to ensure timely, quality service for Veterans at a fair price.

VA continues to be faced with cost overruns and lengthy delays in IT program development and fielding. These shortcomings and mismanagement has resulted in significant cost overruns and greatly extended delivery times while having a negative effect on the delivery of benefits. For example, VA has estimated it will spend \$1.3 billion developing the Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS) which is nearly triple the initial estimate with no firm development completion date or guarantee that it will not require additional funding. Therefore, HVAC will pursue legislation to address Information Technology issues such as the development of software systems and cybersecurity.

The scandal involving access to healthcare at VA has been well-documented. Therefore, an ongoing Committee priority is ensuring veterans are provided timely access to care both inside VA facilities and through community providers, where appropriate. VA currently uses seven

different methods to provide eligible veterans care in the community to include the Choice program which Congress created in 2014 (the Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act of 2014 “Choice Act”) in response to the unprecedented access crisis. VA’s care in the community programs - including Choice - suffer from disparate, often conflicting eligibility criteria, inefficient business processes, and inconsistent reimbursement rates to providers. To better align these competing efforts, the Surface Transportation and Veteran Health Care Choice Improvement Act (Public Law 114-41) required VA to report to Congress by November 1, 2015, with a plan to align all existing non-VA care programs under the Choice Program. We are committed to aggressively pursuing whatever legislation may be necessary to streamline VA’s care in the community programs and ensure that veteran patients are provided high-quality care that is timely and accessible. Further, the Committee will aggressively consider recommendations (final report expected on June 30, 2016) made by the Congressional Commission on Care established by the Choice Act.

Each of the VA’s most recent major medical facility projects in Denver, Las Vegas, New Orleans, and, Orlando have experienced significant cost increases and lengthy schedule delays. Therefore, the Committee will also pursue continued reform of VA’s major and minor construction program and capital asset management processes. The most egregious example of VA’s construction mismanagement is the replacement medical center construction project in Denver which is more than a billion dollars over budget and many years behind schedule. The Committee has already taken steps through legislation and oversight to reform and restructure VA’s construction management processes with a strong focus on their most expensive projects and will continue those efforts. The Committee will also pursue legislation to authorize fiscal year 2016 major medical facility projects and leases, which are another area of concern for the Committee.

The successes of past GI Bill and other post-service training programs as well as today’s Post-9/11 GI Bill in easing the transition from military service to civilian life show the need to continue our support of those types of programs that enable separating servicemembers to reintegrate into civilian life. HVA will also consider legislation to further enhance educational and economic opportunities for student veterans as they attend institutions of higher learning. One of the main priorities of the Committee will be to codify the Veteran Success on Campus Program (VSOC) that is run by VA’s Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Service (VR&E). VA initiated VSOC as a pilot program in 2009, and it is now at 94 campuses nationwide. VSOC is a positive program that helps veterans, servicemembers, and their qualified dependents transition to life as a student, through a coordinated delivery of on-campus benefits assistance and counseling. While the Committee appreciates the goals of this program we believe it is important to codify eligibility requirements and outcome measures in title 38, U.S.C.

The Committee will build on the accountability principles included in the Choice Act by promoting legislation to reform human resources (HR) processes to improve VA's ability to recruit and retain high-quality employees more efficiently. Veterans, VA leaders, and HR professionals have consistently voiced concerns about hiring shortages and inefficiencies across the Department and the Committee believes that VA's often outdated and overly burdensome HR practices threaten the Department's ability to quickly identify, recruit, hire, and retain needed professionals. As part of this effort, the Committee also intends to enhance veteran preference requirements so that qualified veteran candidates are able to join VA's workforce.

Despite VA's success in reducing some of the backlog in disability claims at Regional Offices, HVAC will pursue legislation to address the growing appeals inventory within both the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) and the Board of Veterans' Appeals (the Board). Since 2013, the appeals inventory has ballooned from almost 250,000 to about 433,000 appeals. Moreover, in a recent congressionally mandated report, the Department projected that it will certify almost 360,000 new appeals in FY 17 compared to almost 70,000 certified appeals in FY 15. As Secretary McDonald has conceded, the veterans who file an appeal wait an average of three years for appeals to be resolved by VBA, and an average of five years before the Board may render a decision on appeal. Therefore, the committee will focus on legislative options to gain efficiencies within the appeals process.

The National Cemetery Administration (NCA) has targeted access goals, both urban and rural, in recent years, while sustaining a record of excellent service to veterans and their families. Additionally, NCA has exhibited a continued commitment to ensuring that national cemeteries meet or exceed the highest standards of appearance required by their status as national shrines. HVAC will introduce legislation with the intent of assisting NCA to accomplish its goals of ensuring that our Nation's fallen heroes are treated with the dignity and honor they have earned.

As always, the Members of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs appreciate your support and look forward to working with the Budget Committee for a successful Fiscal Year 2017.

Sincerely,



Jeff Miller
Chairman



Corrine Brown
Ranking Member

Republican Members

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Annunzio Amato

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LA-05

[Signature]

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