

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 27, 2019

The Honorable Robert Wilkie  
Secretary of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Wilkie:

In early 2017, reports surfaced that Veteran caregivers were abruptly discharged from the VA Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers program (Caregivers program) with little notice and despite ongoing needs for care.<sup>1</sup> Two years later, after repeated calls from Congress to improve the administration of the Caregivers program, there have been renewed allegations that Veterans continue to be inappropriately discharged from the Caregivers program.<sup>2</sup> We write to urge you to continue the moratorium on any new discharges in order to develop a consistent process for evaluating the needs of Veterans in the program. We also request information regarding the decision to remove Veterans with ongoing caregiver needs from the program, and regarding any steps that the VA has taken to improve the administration of the Caregivers program since these issues surfaced in 2017.

As you know, the Caregivers program provides vital assistance to families to offset the cost of caring for Veterans who were wounded serving our country. In 2018, recognizing the incredible value that the Caregivers program provides for Veterans and their families, Congress expanded the Caregivers program to cover Veterans who were wounded prior to September 11, 2001.<sup>3</sup> This critical expansion will mean that the Caregivers program's footprint will grow substantially, to include Veterans who fought for our country in the Vietnam War and World War II, among others. Through this expansion, Veterans who are older and who may have more complex needs for care will finally receive the assistance they deserve. That the program will now serve caregivers to older Veterans underscores the importance of ensuring the program is seamlessly administered and heightens our concern over continued shortcomings.

While we were pleased to support the expansion of the Caregivers program, we are disappointed that the VA has failed to make needed improvements in the administration of the program. In August of 2018, the Inspector General for Veterans Affairs (VA OIG) found

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<sup>1</sup> *Some VAs Are Dropping Veteran Caregivers From Their Rolls*, NPR (April 5, 2017) (<https://www.npr.org/2017/04/05/522690583/caregivers-for-veterans-dropped-from-va-plan>).

<sup>2</sup> Letter to David Shulkin, Secretary, Department of Veterans Affairs from Senator Robert P. Casey, Jr. (June 13, 2017); Letter to Robert Wilkie, Secretary, Department of Veterans Affairs from Senator Robert P. Casey, Jr. and Senator Dean Heller (April 24, 2018); Letter to David Shulkin, Secretary, Department of Veterans Affairs from Senator Patty Murray and Senator Jon Tester (April 13, 2017); *VA Still Arbitrarily Cutting Caregivers From Program, Even As It Aims To Expand*, NPR (Dec. 18, 2018) (<https://www.npr.org/2018/12/18/677346997/va-still-arbitrarily-cutting-caregivers-from-program-even-as-it-aims-to-expand>).

<sup>3</sup> S. 2372 (115<sup>th</sup> Cong.).

significant and pervasive problems with the VA's administration of the Caregivers program.<sup>4</sup> In addition to finding that eligible Veterans and their caregivers "did not always receive consistent and appropriate access to the Family Caregiver Program," it found that the VA failed to consistently monitor Veterans' care and level of need, such that it was impossible to tell whether 50% of discharges from the program were properly made.<sup>5</sup>

Given the Inspector General's findings and the reports of recent problematic discharges from the Caregivers program, we are concerned that the Veterans currently covered by the Caregivers program are not being adequately served and that as this program expands these problems will affect new caregivers. To help us understand the steps that the VA has taken to improve the administration of the Caregivers program and how the VA intends to manage its expansion, we request the following information:

- 1) The number of Veterans discharged from the Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers program by tier level each month from July 1, 2017 to January 31, 2019;
- 2) The number of Veterans discharged based on Veteran clinical eligibility for the Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers program each month from July 1, 2017 to January 31, 2019;
- 3) The number of discharges from the program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers by facility each year from January 1, 2017 to January 31, 2019;
- 4) The number of Veterans who had a change in tier level based on clinical eligibility each month between January 1, 2017 and January 31, 2019;
- 5) The number of discharged Veterans who appealed their discharge from the program between January 1, 2017 and January 31, 2019 and the number of those appeals that were granted;
- 6) A description of the appeals process including what evidence must be supplied by the caregiver;
- 7) For each of the Veterans discharged from the Caregivers program who were in tier 3 between January 1, 2017 and January 31, 2019, please provide the Veteran's medical condition, the reason for discharge, the date of discharge and whether there was an appeal for the discharge;
- 8) The number of Veterans who were discharged from the program between January 1, 2017 and January 31, 2019, who have had their case reviewed by the VA to determine if the revocation was justified;

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<sup>4</sup> Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Inspector General, Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers: Management Improvements Needed (Aug. 16, 2018) (17-04003-222).

<sup>5</sup> Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Inspector General, Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers: Management Improvements Needed (Aug. 16, 2018) (17-04003-222).

- 9) The number of staff at each VA facility that are dedicated to the administration of the Caregivers program;
- 10) The number of Veterans that the VA anticipates will be eligible for the Caregivers program once the expansion is complete; and
- 11) A timeline of the VA's planned expansion of the Caregivers program.

We request that you provide this information as soon as possible, but in no event later than March 20, 2019. In addition to this information, we request that you provide a briefing on the measures that the VA has taken to comply with the Inspector General's recommendations, and the plans that VA has to expand the Caregivers program to meet the needs of all Veterans.

Should you have any questions or concerns regarding this request, please contact Caitlin Warner of Senator Casey's staff at [Caitlin\\_Warner@aging.senate.gov](mailto:Caitlin_Warner@aging.senate.gov), Dahlia Melendrez of Senator Tester's staff at [Dahlia\\_Melendrez@vetaff.senate.gov](mailto:Dahlia_Melendrez@vetaff.senate.gov) and Ryan Pettit of Senator Murray's Staff at [Ryan\\_Pettit@murray.senate.gov](mailto:Ryan_Pettit@murray.senate.gov).

We have a duty to ensure that the brave men and women who serve our country and their families receive the care and support they deserve. As such, we thank you for your prompt attention to this matter and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Robert P. Casey, Jr.  
Ranking Member  
U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging



Jon Tester  
Ranking Member  
U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs



Patty Murray  
Ranking Member  
U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions