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November 27, 2017

The Honorable Johnny Isakson, Chairman
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
412 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Jon Tester, Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
825A Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Isakson and Ranking Member Tester:

On behalf of DAV and our 1.3 million members, I am pleased to offer our strong support for your draft legislation, the "Caring for our Veterans Act of 2017", which would strengthen and reform the VA health care system and create a new integrated VA community care program. We urge you to approve this legislation as expeditiously as possible in the Committee and the Senate, and then reach an acceptable compromise with the House so it can be enacted into law this year.

We are pleased the draft legislation you skillfully crafted would replace the current Choice program by creating integrated networks with community providers, supplementing VA's comprehensive system of care, to ensure that veterans receive necessary medical care when and where they need it. The bill includes essential provisions to keep VA responsible for coordinating the care of enrolled veterans and provides new tools, authorities and resources so that veterans will have timely access to high-quality, comprehensive and veteran-focused care. The legislation also creates a new walk-in care benefit for veterans, helping to expand access and fill a critical gap in coverage for many veterans. Importantly, the legislation would provide sufficient new appropriations to enable the current Choice program to meet veterans' needs until the new community care program is implemented and operational next year.

Furthermore, the draft legislation contains a critically important provision that has been a priority for DAV members, the extension of VA's comprehensive caregiver benefits to earlier eras of veterans. This provision, supported by all major veterans service organizations (VSOs), corrects a serious inequity by extending benefits to caregivers of veterans injured or made ill during or prior to the Vietnam War, including World War II and Korean War veterans. As you move this legislation through the Senate and into conference discussions with the House, we urge you to ensure this caregiver equity provision remains part of the final legislation.

I want to commend both of you and your staffs for working in a bipartisan manner to develop legislation that would dramatically improve VA and its community care programs. This carefully constructed bill addresses the interests, priorities and concerns that VA, VSO stakeholders and veterans themselves have expressed over the past few years. I urge all Senators to support passage of this legislation in the Committee and on the Senate floor so that Congress can finally come to an agreement on appropriate legislation to send to the President this year.

Again, thank you both, as well as your staffs, for your strong collaborative relationship and for working so hard to reach agreement on a balanced bill that will strengthen and modernize the VA health care system and ensure that all enrolled veterans have timely access to the health care they deserve and have earned through their service, regardless of where they live.

Sincerely,

GARRY J. AUGUSTINE
Washington Executive Director