

**Congress of the United States**  
Washington, DC 20510

May 24, 2019

The Honorable Robert L. Wilkie  
Secretary of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Wilkie,

As Members of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees, we strongly urge you to implement various requirements related to physician assistants as mandated by the VA Choice and Quality Employment Act of 2017, Public Law 115-46, and the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2018, Public Law 115-141.

As you know, a lack of physician assistants in VA's workforce has a direct impact on its ability to provide timely and high quality care to veterans. Since 2015, VA's Office of the Inspector General has annually identified physician assistant as a mission critical occupation with staffing shortages. Hiring and retaining physician assistants is critical to ensuring that veterans receive timely and high-quality care through VA, especially in light of the more than 40,000 VHA staff shortages.

Congress has intervened several times to direct VA to address the shortage of physician assistants at VA. The VA Choice and Quality Employment Act of 2017, Public Law 115-46, signed into law on August 12, 2017, directed VA to compensate physician assistants with competitive pay. It has been nearly two years since that Act was passed, and VA has yet to take advantage of this tool, thereby failing to market itself as an employer of choice for physician assistants.

Based on information previously provided by VA, it had been our understanding that VA physician assistants were being paid special rates that were equivalent to competitive pay (as required by P.L. 115-46). According to VA, this situation was intended to last only until September 1, 2019, at which point all physician assistants would be converted to the Nurse Locality Pay System. However, we are disappointed to learn that despite VA's recent claims, not all of VA's physician assistants are currently being paid special rates. We are concerned that VA is misrepresenting its efforts to implement competitive pay for physician assistants. We request information on VA's plan and timeline for complying with implementing competitive pay for physician assistants as required by the VA Choice and Quality Employment Act of 2017.

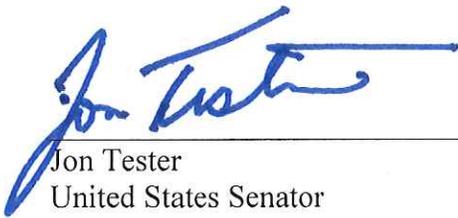
Additionally, section 246 of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2018, Public Law 115-141, directed VA to carry out a 5-year pilot program to train certain former members of the Armed Forces. In a recent letter from VA, Secretary Wilkie communicated that it would be unable to submit a mandated report to Congress about the pilot program one year after the date of the Act's enactment because VA has yet to implement the program. It was further explained that the pilot program will not be implemented until 2021. Implementing this Act three years after its enactment is unacceptable.

Finally, we are alarmed that, despite the repeated findings of VA's Office of Inspector General that physician assistants are one of the top five occupations at VA with staffing shortages, VA has failed to develop a comprehensive plan to address this critical need and has

misrepresented their efforts thus far. Congress has provided VA with a variety of tools to address this shortage. However, progress is still slow. We urge VA to take a hard look at workforce planning and to develop a blueprint for how to best utilize physician assistants at VA and how to best recruit and retain these individuals. Strategies to recruit and retain physician assistants should include how VA intends to work with academic affiliates for recruitment and how VA can best use educational support programs to incentivize physician assistants to work at VA. If while developing this plan, you believe that additional authorities are needed to help VA reach this very important goal, please let us know how we can be of assistance.

We appreciate your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



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Jon Tester  
United States Senator



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Mark Takano  
Member of Congress



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Sherrod Brown  
United States Senator



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Julia Brownley  
Member of Congress



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Chris Pappas  
Member of Congress