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July 16, 2019

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

Dear Secretary Wilkie:

We write with concern regarding the delayed expansion of the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (Caregivers Program) as required under the VA MISSION Act of 2018.

Under the law, eligibility for the Caregivers Program will be expanded to veterans who served prior to September 11, 2001, in two phases: first to those who incurred serious injuries on or prior to May 7, 1975, and then to those who incurred serious injuries between May 7, 1975 and September 11, 2001. However, before VA may expand the Caregivers Program, the law requires that VA implement an Information Technology (IT) system that fully supports the Program and allows for data assessment and comprehensive monitoring. Unfortunately, VA was unable to meet the statutory deadline of October 1, 2018, to implement an IT solution. This means that your certification of implementation of that solution, due on October 1, 2019, will also be delayed.

The delay is troubling given Congress worked hand-in-hand with the Department in establishing the timeline for expansion, and in particular the IT requirements, as outlined in the law. Our understanding is that the Department had been developing a successor IT solution to the Caregiver Application Tracker (CAT), called CareT, when VA identified, too late, some serious concerns about the ability of CareT to support the current and expanded program. Ultimately, VA scrapped CareT in favor of a commercial off-the-shelf program. As a result, VA is well-behind when it indicated, during the drafting of the VA MISSION Act, it would be ready to implement an IT solution for the Caregivers Program.

We also recently learned that VA now plans to replace CAT with the Caregiver Record Management Application (CARMA). We understand that replacement of CAT and the development of other IT to implement the expanded Program will occur in three phases. The target date for CARMA to replace CAT in Phase One is October 2019. During Phase Two, VA would also work to automate processing of the Caregiver stipend by January 2020. Finally, in Phase Three VA would carry out updates to legacy systems, enable online application submissions and ensure that CARMA is able to meet all reporting needs. Regrettably, VA has no target for completion of Phase Three – but we understand that it could be as late as the third quarter of 2020.

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When VA does finally certify the IT solution is fully implemented, VA will have two years to execute the expansion to those veterans who incurred injuries on or prior to May 7, 1975. That means it could be four or more years from when the VA MISSION Act was signed into law before a veteran and his or her caregiver ever submits an application for the expanded benefit.

Mr. Secretary, we know we do not need to tell you how important this benefit is for veterans and caregivers who have been waiting decades for comprehensive assistance from VA. We need assurance that the timeframe laid out above is the most aggressive that VA can responsibly execute because any delay in providing this significant assistance is a broken promise to our most seriously injured veterans. Therefore we request that VA thoroughly review its planned timeline for implementation of the expanded Caregivers Program, including development and implementation of the IT solution, drafting regulations, and completing improvements to the current program. We also ask that you provide us with the outcome of the review, including any updates to the timeline.

Because of this Program's significance to the veterans' community, we encourage VA to adopt a messaging strategy that educates veterans and caregivers who might be impacted by this change in law of when they can expect the Program to be up-and-running. Please provide us with a plan for communicating with veterans and caregivers, especially those who would be eligible for benefits in the first phase of expansion, about changes to the Program.

We appreciate your attention to this matter and thank you for all that you do on behalf of our nation's veterans.

Sincerely,



Johnny Isakson
Chairman



Jon Tester
Ranking Member