

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

December 5, 2017

The Honorable David J. Shulkin, M.D.  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Ave, NW  
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Shulkin:

We write to express our grave concerns regarding a proposal reportedly being considered by the Administration to partially merge the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Department of Defense (DOD) health care systems. If adopted, this radical shift in policy could undermine care for veterans, increase their medical costs and dramatically expand the federal government's reliance on the private sector to meet the unique needs of men and women who served our nation in uniform. We strongly urge you to reconsider this proposal and to refrain from taking any additional steps to implement it without first consulting with key stakeholders, including interested Members of Congress and veterans groups.

While we strongly support ongoing efforts to strengthen coordination between VA and DOD, it is important to note that the two Departments serve separate patient populations with drastically different needs. Specifically, Tricare beneficiaries are generally younger and healthier than veterans who receive care through the VA. As stakeholders will attest, providers at the VA are uniquely trained and equipped to manage the care of a patient population that suffers from combat-related injury and illness, including traumatic brain injury and PTSD, in a culturally competent environment. We are therefore concerned that merging the two programs would compromise critical services for older veterans and those with serious medical conditions. Further, a Tricare-VA merger could compel veterans entitled to care provided by the VA system to instead seek care through the private sector, a shift that could unfairly force veterans to pay out-of-pocket costs that they wouldn't otherwise be required to bear.

In addition to the potentially harmful impacts of this proposal, we are deeply concerned by the manner in which such a consequential change in veterans policy is being considered. No public meetings or hearings have been held. No independent studies have been conducted to estimate the cost of such a merger or to assess its implications for quality of care. Moreover, national veterans service organizations, which collectively represent the interests of tens of millions of American veterans, have not been asked to provide input or recommendations as part of the decision-making process. In fact, our best information about the substance of your proposal has come to light only as a result of media reporting on closed door deliberations within the Administration. That's certainly not the way that policy changes affecting millions of veterans should be considered.

Finally, as strong supporters of high quality veterans' health care and as advocates for the VA's role as a direct provider of care to veterans, we believe this proposal represents a misguided step in the direction of privatization. Again, given its potential consequences for our veterans and for the integrity of the VA health care system, we request that you reconsider your support for this merger and urge you to fully and transparently engage with key stakeholders, including Congress and veterans organizations, on this issue moving forwards.

Sincerely,



Ruben Gallego  
Member of Congress



Salud O. Carbajal  
Member of Congress



Anthony G. Brown  
Member of Congress



Ted Lieu  
Member of Congress



Collin C. Peterson  
Member of Congress