



*The National Voice for Direct-Care RNs*

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Dear Senator,

We write today as registered nurses and leaders of National Nurses United, the nation's largest union and professional association of registered nurses, representing 185,000 nurses across the United States, including those working at 22 Veterans Affairs facilities.

The duty of registered nurses within the VA healthcare system is to provide high quality care and to advocate for the men and women who put their lives and health at risk defending our nation. Our members are the front-line caregivers and our work includes efforts to ensure that patients get the care they need and being constantly vigilant on their behalf.

Nurses are horrified by the creation of secret waiting lists at VA facilities, and even more importantly, the delays in treatment and care that those lists hid. Actions like these that put our nation's veterans in danger when they need care are inexcusable and should be dealt with severely.

The lists revealed recently in the media, however, are only symptoms of deeper problems. The VA is suffering from a tragic lack of resources that leads to delays in care, it spends resources in ways that do not benefit veterans, and it does not sufficiently empower front line caregivers to act as patient advocates. We were encouraged by the news last week that Senators Sanders and McCain are working on legislation to strike at some of the VA system's problems. As that legislation comes for your consideration please keep in mind four key points.

First, we commend senators who address the dramatic underfunding of the VA system. Due to changes in weaponry, protective gear, and the nature of conflicts, more of our service members are returning from war than ever. Since at least Operation Desert Storm, the VA has not had the resources to provide adequate and timely care to the increased numbers of veterans returning from our continuing wars and conflicts. While Congress has spent billions on wars and conflicts over the past few years, not enough has been spent to care for service members returning from them. Congress has not funded the VA adequately to cope with the increasing demands of care for the older generations of World War II, Korea and Vietnam veterans, or to deal with the epidemic of suicides and military sexual trauma (MST) among service members. Our nation cannot send our troops into harm's way without a full commitment to helping our returning injured service members. If our nation continues to engage our military in wars and conflicts, then we must bear the costs of supporting our troops when they return. That means that the real solution to the backlog at the VA is both to wage fewer wars and provide adequate funding for the staff, facilities, equipment and materials to ensure that veterans get the care they need.

Second, VA funding must be directed, and management and structure must be reformed to ensure that veterans get the care they need. The VA suffers from dramatic understaffing of frontline care workers. Too often VA funding goes to administration, rather than the frontline nurses and other health professionals that actually provide care. Reforms like mandatory, minimum nurse-to-patient ratios make high quality care possible and will enable nurses to care for patients to the best of their abilities. Furthermore, improving whistleblower protections will help nurses to ensure that their patients are getting quality, timely care.

Third, nurses must be empowered to be patient advocates in a way that they are not today so that they can act to protect veterans who have served their nation. As you may know, Section 7422 of title 38 of the U.S. code limits the rights of VA professionals in collective bargaining. Unfortunately, these statutory exemptions have been unduly broadened by unfair executive branch interpretations over time, leaving workers with few meaningful collective bargaining rights. Yet nurses need full collective bargaining rights in order to fulfill their critical role as advocates for patient needs and care. As nurses are an integral part of the frontline team within the VA healthcare system, they have both a duty and a right to advocate for patients. The law as it is presently applied often prevents nurses from advocating for their patients or on their own behalf in other matters. It makes no sense that VA nurses are singled out and have fewer rights than other VA clinicians,

including LPNs, nursing assistants, and nursing unit clerks, or registered nurses (RNs) at other agencies such as the Defense Department.

We urge you to include in your legislation a measure to modify Section 7422 of title 38 to improve the collective bargaining rights and procedures for certain employees of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), which would improve patient care, ensure equity among federal health care workers, and enable the VA to recruit and retain a strong health care work force to serve the nation's veterans. Legislation introduced by Senator Sherrrod Brown that embodies these important measures, S. 1556, has already passed the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs. Collective bargaining gives VA nurses the tools to speak up for our veteran patients, which is why veterans groups such as Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America and Vietnam Veterans of America have supported legislation to modify Section 7422. Such a measure would strengthen the whistleblower protections of RNs, which once enacted, will be invaluable to prevent another such scandal from occurring and would be a tremendous service to the patients we serve.

Finally, nurses know that the unique healthcare needs of veterans are best met through the VA system, and we join veterans in expressing opposition to the notion of allowing VA funds to go to private health care corporations. Measures to do so would undermine the VA system of care to the detriment of veterans.

We hope that you will redouble your commitment to quality health care for our nation's veterans and fair treatment for all VA health care workers who are on the front line of providing care for our veterans.

Yours sincerely,

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