



August 27, 2018

The Honorable Rodney Frelinghuysen
Chairman
Committee on Appropriations
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Nita Lowey
Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Lamar Alexander
Chairman, Subcommittee on Energy and Water
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patrick Leahy
Vice Chairman
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Frelinghuysen, Ranking Member Lowey, Chairman Alexander, and Vice Chairman Leahy:

On behalf of the American College of Physicians (ACP), I am writing in reference to the Energy and Water, Legislative Branch, and Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations Act, 2019, H.R. 5895. As the conference committee works to finalize a conference report in the coming weeks, we strongly urge the committee to provide the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) with sufficient resources for the VA's vital healthcare mission for *all* of our nation's veterans, both for our veterans receiving care through traditional Veteran's Health Administration (VHA) services, as well as for those veterans needing access to care in the community. The VHA provides high-value and critically important health care services to veterans, and that infrastructure should be adequately funded and supported going forward. There is also a demonstrated need to ensure funding for those veterans who legitimately need access to care in the community, as stipulated in the recently-enacted VA Mission Act, without diverting precious funds from existing VHA medical services or other vital federal health care programs. The bipartisan "Complete the VA Mission Funding" amendment, sponsored by Senators Shelby and Leahy, would accomplish this and we urge its inclusion as part of the final conference report.

The American College of Physicians is the largest medical specialty organization and the second-largest physician group in the United States. ACP members include 154,000 internal medicine physicians (internists), related subspecialists, and medical students. Internal medicine physicians are specialists who apply scientific knowledge and clinical expertise to the diagnosis, treatment, and compassionate care of adults across the spectrum from health to complex illness.

The VA Mission Act of 2018 was intended to streamline the VA's numerous medical community care programs into one cohesive program, an effort we consider as admirable, but it also made transformational changes to how care is provided inside and outside the VHA, which we believe could

have unintended consequences. ACP has previously offered its [input and concerns](#) regarding that legislation and we will address various policy reforms made in that legislation, as appropriate, during the rulemaking process as this law enters the implementation phase.

The VA Mission Act, while providing transitional mandatory funding for the existing Veterans Choice Program (VCP), effectively moved the source of funding for the new VHA medical community care program, the Veterans Community Care Program (VCCP), from mandatory funding to discretionary appropriations. Unfortunately, the VA Mission Act's \$5.2 billion in mandatory funding for the VCP is projected to last only until May 2019, leaving an estimated \$1.6 billion shortfall for fiscal year 2019 alone. Consequently, the additional VCP funding *and* the medical community care funding for the VCCP must abide by the fiscal year 2019 non-defense discretionary-spending cap established by the Bipartisan Budget Act (BBA) of 2018 as well as whatever those caps are for fiscal years 2020 and 2021. However, Congress *never* expected that the fiscal year 2019 cap in the BBA of 2018 and the anticipated caps for fiscal years 2020 and 2021 would have to accommodate the tens of billions in additional funding for the VCP and its consolidated successor program, the VCCP, in the annual discretionary appropriations process.

The Shelby-Leahy "Complete the VA Mission Funding" amendment, as proposed during earlier deliberations, would provide \$1.6 billion more in FY 2019, an additional \$8.6 billion in FY 2020, and \$9.5 billion in FY 2021 to address the estimated shortfall in VA funding without cutting funding for other programs. It is in the best interest of veterans that Congress addresses this VA funding shortfall now, before the implementation of the VA Mission Act gets too far along and before the care and services for veterans becomes unduly compromised.

Many of ACP's physician members work and provide care within the VHA and are deeply committed to the VA's mission to provide high quality, comprehensive, and timely care to veterans in their time of need and throughout their lifetime. ACP recognizes the important health care services that the VHA provides to this nation's military veterans as well as its significant overall contribution as the nation's largest health care system, the largest provider of graduate medical education, and a valuable contributor of medical and scientific research.

We appreciate this opportunity to provide input on this very important matter and we look forward to working with you going forward. We look forward to continuing to provide the clinician perspective on VA funding matters, as appropriate.

Sincerely,



Ana María López, MD, MPH, FACP
President

CC: Energy and Water, Legislative Branch, and Military Construction and Veterans Affairs
Appropriations Act, 2019, Conferees.