

Statement by Senator McCain before House Veterans Affairs Committee

March 7, 2017

Thank you Chairman Roe and Ranking Member Walz for the opportunity to appear before this committee to discuss the Veterans Choice Program.

I want to talk to you about veterans' access to care and how we got here, starting with the Steve Cooper, an Army veteran who served his country for 18 years. In return for his service, Steve waited for almost two years before seeing a doctor at the Phoenix VA. By the time he received care, his routine urology appointment turned into a diagnosis of terminal cancer.

Steve wasn't alone in his need for care. In 2014, our country was shocked to learn that Steve was one of 15,000 veterans standing in line for care in Phoenix – 3,300 of whom were urology patients. This national disgrace served as the catalyst for *the Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act* that created the Veterans Choice Program, which has enabled veterans to see providers in the community for their health care needs.

The Choice Act required the VA to implement the Veterans Choice Program in under 90 days – an ambitious undertaking that experienced some growing pains. Despite a few road-bumps, the Veterans Choice Program to-date has accomplished its intended goal of increasing access to care for our nation's veterans. In fact, since its inception, veterans have made **more than seven million appointments with community providers for everything from diagnostic tests and urology screenings, to life saving heart and cancer treatment.**

While there has been significant progress in improving veterans' health care, we have a long way to go to change the status quo plaguing the VA. That is why we must not abandon our effort to provide choice and flexibility in veterans' health care, and why we must continue the hard work of refining and improving the Veterans Choice Program.

In order to achieve this, Congress must first act quickly to reauthorize the Veterans Choice Program, which is set to expire in a few short months. Have no doubt: if we let this program lapse, hundreds of thousands of veterans will lose their ability to visit a community provider, the VA system will once again become overwhelmed, and veterans will go back to the pre-scandal days of unending wait-times for much-

needed care. Continuing the Veterans Choice Program is the only way we can fully eliminate the wait-time problem at the VA and ensure veterans have access to timely and quality care.

With the expiration of Choice authorization rapidly approaching, I understand the VA already has begun limiting care under the Veterans Choice Program for veterans whose treatments would extend beyond August 7, 2017. I also understand that the VA's new plan for community care will not be fully operational until at least 2019. Given this reality, I am concerned that veterans nationwide may encounter significant lapses in care if we do not act quickly. This outcome is not only avoidable, but it is unacceptable and we in Congress must act.

I am pleased to have introduced the *Veterans Choice Continuation Act*, with the Senate Veterans Committee Chairman, Senator Johnny Isakson, the Committee's Ranking member, Senator Jon Tester, as well as Senator Jerry Moran. This bipartisan legislation would remove the current sunset date for the *Veterans Choice Act*. I applaud you and your committee for taking up companion legislation that would do the same.

Reauthorizing the Veterans Choice program would not only benefit veterans, but it would also provide Congress with the time we need to work with Secretary Shulkin to refine the next generation of Choice – a consolidated and even more standardized network of community care. The VA has provided Congress with its proposal for the future of community care, and we deserve time to study that proposal to ensure it strikes the right balance.

In closing, let me be clear – no one is advocating that we privatize the VA. Many veterans are satisfied with the VA, which often provides superior specialized treatment in the areas of mental health, post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury. At the same time, we simply cannot afford to go back to the pre-scandal days when a VA bureaucrat had the final say on where and when a veteran received care. Such thinking was what resulted in nearly 15,000 veterans standing in line for care in Phoenix. I know you agree, as does Secretary Shulkin, and I look forward to working with all of you and my colleagues in the Senate to extend the Veteran Choice Program and continue to keep faith with our nation's veterans.

Thank you for the invitation to join you this evening and for your leadership on this critical matter. I'm confident that by working together, we can preserve access to health care for those who have borne the price of battle.