

Congressman John Rutherford (FL-04) Testimony

Draft legislation to improve the VA Health Professionals Educational Assistance Program

House Veterans' Affairs Committee – Subcommittee on Health

September 26, 2017

Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Brownley, fellow members of the Subcommittee – thank you for the opportunity to speak on behalf of this draft legislation that would improve the Health Professional Educational Assistance Program at the VA.

This Subcommittee has frequently heard testimony regarding the high number of physician vacancies at the VA and the negative impact this has on the care of our nation's veterans. Currently, the VA has several programs to address recruitment in their profession ranks, including the Education Debt Repayment Program (RDRP) and the Health Professions Scholarship Program (HPSP). While these programs have improved recruitment, "physician" remains the top VA mission critical shortage, with the current estimate for physician vacancies to be 3,500. One way to ensure that the VA is long term staffed with qualified providers is to recruit those who are currently in medical school or are in residency and assist in their education expenses in exchange for their service within the VA system.

As we as a Congress work with our partners in the Administration and in our communities to improve care and decrease wait times, I believe it is critical that the VA has the tools to recruit and retain providers in areas that are desperately needed throughout the system.

This draft legislation makes three primary improvements to these programs.

First, it requires the VA to provide a minimum total of fifty 2 to 4 year scholarships annually for students studying to become physicians or dentists while the shortage of these professions is 500 or greater. These students will then be obligated to provide clinical service at a VA facility for 18 months for each year of scholarship support.

Second, this legislation requires the VA to create a pilot program to fund two scholarships at each of the five Teague-Cranston Act medical schools for veterans who qualify for admission to those medical schools. The schools that participate in this program will each reserve two seats in each class for the veteran recipients of these scholarships. The veterans are obligated to provide clinical service at a VA facility for a minimum of 4 years in exchange for the scholarship.

Third, it standardizes and increases the VA loan repayment program for newly graduated medical students or those currently in residency who will be training in specialties deemed as shortages in VHA. The loan payments will be a maximum of \$40,000 per year with a maximum total of \$160,000. Following completion of residency training, the loan recipients will be obligated to provide clinical service at a VA facility for a year for each \$40,000 of loan repayment, but in no case fewer than two years. The current program varies among the VISNs and is not adequately competitive.

The VA has made many impactful changes in recent years, but it is important that we consider ways the VA can attract talent on the front end to improve the system long term. A key part of this is attracting young talent that will come into the system and compete with the private sector.

In closing, I would like to thank the Chairman, the Ranking Member, my colleagues on the Committee, and the Subcommittee staff for their commitment to this and the other pieces of legislation under consideration today that would continue to improve the VA health system.

Congressman John Rutherford represents the 4th Congressional district of Florida. Prior to being elected in 2016, Congressman Rutherford served as the Sheriff of Duval County for 12 years where he led initiatives to reduce crime in Jacksonville to a 40-year low. He serves on the House Committee on Homeland Security, the House Judiciary Committee, and the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs.