

AMERICAN FEDERATION OF GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES, AFL-CIO
PROVIDED TO THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH
"FY 2019 DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS BUDGET REQUEST FOR THE
VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION"
MARCH 15, 2018

Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Brownley, Members of the Subcommittee,

The American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), appreciates the opportunity to submit a statement for the record for this hearing regarding President Trump's FY 2019 budget request for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). AFGE represents nearly 700,000 federal employees, including 250,000 employees at the VA, and more specifically, the overwhelming majority of non-management frontline VA employees who provide direct medical and mental health services to our nation's veterans. It is imperative that Congress give VA employees the resources they need to succeed, and that means investing money into the VA and its staff instead of sending precious resources to the private sector.

One issue that needs an immediate remedy is chronic understaffing across the VA system. AFGE has repeatedly raised the issue of the outrageous understaffing at the Department. It seems that VA has a policy of not filling positions that even they acknowledge should be filled. We would like to use this statement to once again point out that there are approximately 35,000 positions that need to be filled. But instead of seeking to hire for these positions, the Department proceeds without any sense of urgency. Pushing veterans to the unaccountable private sector while the Department needs 35,000 additional front line personnel is a national disgrace. If the White House and VA want to fix internal problems at the Department they absolutely must get serious about staffing the agency. Anything short of a firm hiring commitment is yet another Band-Aid on a multi-year problem. As the Independent Budget Veterans Service Organizations state in the Independent Budget, every expansion in the temporary CHOICE Program has increased demand for VA in-house services. Front line clinicians and support staff now have additional demands to manage Choice referrals, assist overwhelmed veterans and ensure continuity of care as veterans are shuttled between the two systems.

On January 17, 2018, Secretary Shulkin testified before the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee and was asked directly about the Department's hiring plans. When asked about vacancies Secretary Shulkin said, "I just want to understand what they are,

35,000 vacancies, we have 370,000 employees, a 9 percent vacancy rate which is not overly high. So you're always going to have 40,000 vacancies during the course of the year.” We respectfully disagree with this sentiment. The VA provides critical care and services to a special population, our nation’s heroes, and we should not accept the status quo when it comes to serving their needs. Surely, we can all agree that the brave men and women who have worn the uniform and borne the battle deserve more than simply the bare minimum when it comes to adequate staffing of health care providers. AFGE continues to urge Congress and the Administration to address VA staffing and hire 35,000 additional and necessary front-line personnel.

Sadly, instead of addressing the internal problems with understaffing, leadership at the VA has opted to privatize core functions of the VA. The Department is opting to send care and services to costly, unaccountable private contractors instead of hiring adequate staff to perform these functions at the VA. A central topic last year was the notion of “accountability” yet the VA continues to send veterans outside of the VA to contractors who are held to no accountability standard. While VA employees must meet quality standards and have their performance scrutinized, no such oversight is conducted on private providers who operate in the CHOICE program. As Congress considers the VA budget, it must demand that the Department stop outsourcing vital functions.

AFGE continues to be concerned about the way money allocated to the VA is being spent. Specifically, as part of the larger budget deal in February there was a bipartisan agreement to allocate \$4 billion to the VA over the course of two years. The intent was that this money would be used for the VA to address infrastructure needs. However, the White House has insinuated that they would like to see part of this money diverted from the VA and used to patch the CHOICE Program. We urge Congress to oppose any change in the way this funding is used and allocated. Leadership on both sides of the aisle agreed that the entire \$4 billion – \$2 billion in FY 18 and \$2 billion in FY 19 – would be used for the VA and its internal needs.

The Senate and House VA Committees have spent a considerable amount of time debating and considering CHOICE funding and possible replacements. It is inappropriate to use the appropriations process to circumvent the Committees and send VA-specified money to CHOICE. The Department and the White House must be transparent in their dealings with Congress, VA employees, and veterans. It’s disingenuous to accept money for the Department but then attempt to syphon that money off for other purposes. This smoke-and-mirrors approach to funding the VA is inappropriate, bad for veterans, and bad for employees. We urge Congress to adequately oversee how appropriated dollars are spent by the Department.

Finally, AFGE has serious reservations about using medical service dollars as a slush fund to subsidize unaccountable private sector care. Specifically, the President’s

Budget recommends “combining the Medical Community Care and Medical Services accounts” in order to, supposedly, streamline operations. AFGE unequivocally opposes this recommendation and urges Congress to reject it outright. These are two separate and distinct accounts that should not be forced together for the Administration’s convenience. We further oppose any change in funding streams that could divert resources from the VA and send that money to contractors. As can be seen by the 35,000 positions the VA needs to hire, the agency must have funding devoted to its own direct operations; and Congress must hold the Department accountable in the way the VA spends taxpayer money entrusted to it.

Thank you.