



STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

KELLY D. SKINNER, DNP, APRN, NP-C, GNP-BC, CRRN, WCC, CFCN

PRESIDENT

NURSES ORGANIZATION OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (NOVA)

BEFORE

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH

WITH RESPECT TO

VETERANS' LEGISLATION

WASHINGTON, D.C.

July 14, 2021

Chairman Brownley, Ranking Member Bergman and Members of the Subcommittee; on behalf of the nearly 3,000 members of the Nurses Organization of Veterans Affairs (NOVA), I would like to offer our comments on several bills being considered today.

NOVA is a professional organization for nurses employed by the Department of Veterans Affairs. Our members are the frontline and specialty care healthcare professionals taking care of Veterans at VA facilities around the country. As such, we will be providing our thoughts on bills that fall under our purview and align with our legislative priority goals.

H.R. 2775, VA Quality Health Care Accountability and Transparency Act would require the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to make certain information publicly available on the VA website. Information to be posted and directly accessible to the general public would include staffing and vacancy rates, quality of care data, statistics related to patient wait times and effectiveness of care for patients.

NOVA believes that transparency is critical at all levels of care and would note that in order to collect proper information related to staffing, access to care, timeliness, safety and quality of care given patients, the site must include community providers and those contracted under the Veterans Community Care Networks. If the goal is to provide information to Veterans seeking care and/or others looking to compare access, quality of care and staffing levels then all VA providers must be captured.

Currently, VA provides data on its access and quality healthcare standards via its [Access and Quality in VA Healthcare](#) site. Information collected includes comparisons to private sector care to include access times at individual hospitals and facilities (hospital compare), provider care, same day service, as well as quality standards and ratings. We would also note that section 505 of the VA MISSION Act requires VA to release, on a quarterly basis, certain staffing and vacancy data to provide transparency on VA's progress in staffing its medical facilities. Having access to staffing vacancies in real time is critical.

Because much of what this bill requires is already being tracked and reported as well as audited by the VA's Office of Inspector General, we cannot support at this time.

H.R. 3027, Veterans Improved Access to Care Act of 2021.

NOVA has advocated for increased hiring of staff and a more efficient onboarding process, and it remains one of our top legislative priorities. We have urged Congress and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to address the complexities of a system that is decades old, which does not allow for VHA to remain competitive. We are happy to support this bill but would like to offer a few comments to strengthen the language.

The onboarding process or definition thereof should reflect the full hiring process – from posting the job vacancy to the job offer. Significant delays remain in the entire process from job announcement posted on internet sites (USA jobs) to interviewing and selection of candidates. Addressing these delays are critical. VA should continue to utilize and refine its newly expedited hiring process which was proven effective during the COVID-19 pandemic. Timely application and quicker onboarding enabled many areas of the country to eliminate barriers and hire within weeks rather than months. The agency reported nearly 49,000 vacancies prior to 2019 and was able to hire quickly and fill thousands of open healthcare positions in 2020. A closer look at processes within the Time to Hire - which is an HR metric that is helpful but also limited as it often does not reflect the time from true vacancy through onboarding date, would be a good place to start.

We applaud Section 3, which creates a pilot program at ten VA facilities to study and improve all aspects of onboarding with the goal of expediting the overall hiring process. We would offer that strengthening Human Resources to include employing a full-time recruiter at each facility should also be considered essential in any hiring process.

NOVA strongly supports *H.R. 3693, Department of Veterans Affairs Continuing Professional Education Modernization Act or VA CPE Modernization Act.*”

NOVA has supported increasing continuing education benefits as a tool to encourage professional development and as an incentive for recruiting and retaining valuable staff.

The *VA CPE Modernization Act* will expand and increase tuition and course fees to \$2000 for VA clinicians allowing nurses, nurse practitioners, physician assistants and others to be eligible for this benefit.

The value of continuing education cannot be overstated as it enables healthcare professionals to comply with laws, standards and retain certifications necessary for them to remain licensed and working in their desired profession. The expense of certifications, particularly specialty certifications where staffing vacancies are known to be higher, often prevent some healthcare professionals from pursuing these areas of expertise. This bill would help to cover some of the costs which will benefit those areas of hire.

We thank Chairwoman Brownley and Representative Miller-Meeke for introducing this legislation which we believe will provide a strong incentive towards recruitment and retention efforts while helping VA to remain competitive in all local areas, and by including a built-in mechanism to adjust annual caps based on inflation it will help the benefit retain its future value.

Discussion Draft to amend title 38, United States Code, to require an independent assessment of health care delivery systems and management processes of the Department of Veterans Affairs be conducted once every 10 years, and for other purposes.

While NOVA appreciates the intent of this bill which would require an independent and comprehensive assessment of VA’s healthcare delivery systems every ten years, we believe that it is premature at this time. VA currently is undertaking market assessments as required by Section 106 of the MISSION Act which will support the impending Asset and Infrastructure Review (AIR/Section 203 of the MISSION Act).

AIR includes a nine-member independent panel/commission (Asset and Infrastructure Review Commission or “AIR Commission”) which will be responsible for assessing VA hospitals, clinics and other healthcare facilities with the goal of designing/realigning and modernizing VA infrastructure to meet the future needs of an ever-changing Veterans population. The AIR process has already begun and will finalize its work in 2023 with final recommendations going to Congress.

The draft bill also seems to replicate much of what is being considered as part of VA’s comprehensive transformation of its health care system. The VA is also required to produce a Strategic Plan to Meet Health Care Demand (MISSION Act) and a quadrennial review of VHA every four years to plan for and meet the needs of its patient population. We would also point

out that several agencies already provide necessary oversight - to include the VA Office of Inspector General, and the Government Accountability Office (GAO) which regularly reviews and reports on many aspects of management and processes within VA. Not to mention Congress and the Committee meeting and discussing legislation today.

As nurses we have seen a shift and change in the delivery of care since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, continuing to be prepared for any surge in hospital and emergency care is essential. Perhaps a study of best practices to include all aspects of VA and non-VA care after all of the other items mentioned here have been completed would provide some valuable data.

Thank you for allowing us to provide our thoughts on the bills before you today, we look forward to working with the committee to ensure that VA can continue to provide timely, high quality compassionate care now and into the future.

NOVA is a nationwide, nonprofit professional organization whose members are nurses working for the Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Centers and Clinics. NOVA is not part of the VHA, nor is NOVA sanctioned or endorsed by the VHA.