



## AMERICAN FEDERATION OF GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES, AFL-CIO

**Dr. Everett B. Kelley**  
*National Secretary-Treasurer*

**J. David Cox, Sr.**  
*National President*

**Jeremy A. Lannan**  
*NVP for Women & Fair Practices*

December 4, 2019

Dear Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Roe and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of the American Federation of Government Employees, AFL-CIO (AFGE), which represents approximately 700,000 federal and District of Columbia government employees in 70 agencies, including 260,000 employees of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), I write to express opposition to H.R. 3495, the "Improve Well-being of Veterans Act," and to urge the Committee to instead support Chairman Takano's Amendment in the Nature of a Substitute (ANS) to H.R. 3495.

As written, AFGE strongly opposes H.R. 3495, the "Improve Well-Being of Veterans Act." This legislation would allow private entities to receive funding from the VA to provide clinical care to veterans without any coordination or accountability to the VA. Outsourcing clinical care services for veterans at risk of suicide through this proposed grant program will undermine veterans' well-being, not improve it. The most appropriate source of clinical care for at-risk veterans is the VA's world-class health care system, including its highly regarded telemental health program and its Community Care Network (CCN).

Under H.R. 3495, clinical care provided by grantees would be fragmented and lack the specialization, provider competency, coordination and accountability of care provided through the VA. There would be a lack of fiscal controls and it would be unprecedented to fund clinical care for veterans without any prior authorization from the VA. There are two major areas of concern. First, the maximum grant amount is left totally up to the discretion of the Secretary. This could allow a large national organization to exert significant influence in the grant selection process in order to receive a large share of the grant funds even if it would better serve veterans to allocate grants to a greater number of small community-based organizations. Second, the bill does not require grant recipients to disclose how grant funds are used. As written, grant funds can be used for large CEO salaries and other indirect costs instead of direct services to veterans and neither Congress nor the public will be able to determine if funding is being used appropriately.

Finally, absent from the list of entities who the Secretary shall consult under this bill are the labor representatives, the VA employees who are on the front lines every day providing clinical care and wraparound services to veterans. More than one-third of the VA workforce is comprised of veterans, including many who use VA health care themselves. Their unique expertise, personal perspective and their ability to hold the VA accountable for mismanagement make them and their labor representatives essential to any grant oversight group.

AFGE supports Chairman Takano's ANS to H.R. 3495 to establish a grant program for at-risk veterans. It would fund a wide array of non-clinical services while prohibiting the use of any funds on clinical care or cash assistance. The VA's telemental health program and CCN should be the sources of clinical care for all veterans, and we should work together to ensure that more veterans use and are eligible for VA

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health care services. Similarly, cash assistance is already available when appropriate through community-based programs that already have proven track records with the VA.

Chairman Takano's ANS encourages more effective allocation of grant dollars and provides safeguards against misuse of grant funds. It would set a dollar cap on first year and second year grants, and would require organizations to have matching funds, which is a valuable screening tool for identifying entities with a strong financial track record. Grant applicants would also be required to specify the amount of grant funds available to community partners and the financial controls that will be put in place to track the expenditure of grant funds. The ANS includes critical reporting requirements regarding the use of funds for executive compensation, overhead costs and other indirect costs. Labor representatives who are front line VA employees are also included as participants in the advisory group that would consult with the Secretary and other entities and stakeholders on administration of the grant program and services to veterans.

AFGE urges the Committee in the strongest possible terms to oppose H.R. 3495 and support Chairman Takano's ANS to the bill. AFGE stands ready to work with the Committee to identify the most effective, least risky ways to fill existing gaps in direct care and wraparound services for veterans. The VA has already expanded access to those with other than honorable discharges and it can do more to fund and expand these services. The VA is the nation's leader in telemental health, and it can do more to increase use of its unique services to veterans who face challenges coming to VA facilities. The VA already has strong family counseling and clinician training programs; it can do more to expand services to family members by adding spouse-only therapy and filling the over 40,000 unfilled VA health care positions. The VA's Vet Centers have a long history of working with strong community-based organizations to reach out to isolated at-risk veterans. VA mental health professionals and researchers already work with other experts to identify and address barriers that keep veterans from seeking care at the VA; with the help of well-managed community-based outreach groups, they can do more.

Fragmented care and unrestricted grants to unknown providers and outreach organizations are not in the best interests of veterans. The VA treats the whole veteran and is the national model of integrating primary care and mental health care. Every veteran deserves that high level of care.

**Please support Chairman Takano's ANS to H.R. 3495, the "Improve Well-Being of Veterans Act."**  
For additional information or questions, please contact Marilyn Park at [mpark@afge.org](mailto:mpark@afge.org) or 202-639-6456.

Sincerely,



Alethea Predeoux  
Legislative Director