

November 20, 2017

Dear Representative:

The undersigned labor organizations that represent Veterans in both the government and private sectors, strongly urge you to oppose HR 4243, the “Veterans Affairs Asset and Infrastructure Review Act of 2017”. This legislation presents a grave threat to the survival of the VA’s excellent, specialized, integrated health care system. This measure would destroy veterans’ preferred health care system by using the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) process established for the Department of Defense (DOD) that has been widely rejected due to its associated costs and harmful outcomes for local communities.

The bill would strip Congress of its power to stop these closures by placing every brick and mortar decision about the future of the VA health care system in the hands of unelected officials handpicked by the President. In fact, the harmful reach of the VA BRAC bill is more expansive than the DoD BRACs proposal because every VA facility would be subject to the Commission’s authority including hospitals, clinics, nursing homes, including domiciliary for homeless veterans, and Vet Centers that provide readjustment counseling for returning veterans. In addition to the power to decide when to shutter the doors of a VA hospital, this bill would give the Commission the final say over which VA facilities to build and which existing facilities to repair and modernize.

If HR 4243 becomes law, Members of Congress will lose their ability to fight for the interests of veterans and all other constituents in their communities who cherish and depend on their VA medical centers for medical care and a broad array of other services. In addition, VA medical centers provide good jobs for returning veterans and economic stimulus for local businesses.

The BRAC process has absolutely no place in veterans’ health care. If the Commission closes a VA medical center, the veterans who have lost that vital source of care cannot go to another VA three states away. Veterans will instead have to rely on the options that privatizers are pushing harder for every day: contractor run primary care provider networks that steer veterans to local for-profit hospitals and specialty care networks where veterans’ care will be fragmented, restricted, and inferior to VA’s own specialized care for veterans’ unique wounds of war.

Please also be beware of the empty promises of cost-savings made by bill proponents. Military BRACs have often had very large upfront costs and do not deliver on promised savings.

In addition, this bill does nothing to address the immediate, dire staffing and infrastructure needs of the VA that are cause longer wait times for care and make it harder for the VA to attract and retain clinicians. The only funds earmarked for the VA in this bill are \$500 million for minor construction and non-recurring maintenance.

Instead, the VA should immediately fill the nearly 50,000 vacancies reported by VA Secretary Shulkin in order to prevent more veterans from being forced into private sector care under the

broken Choice Program – a program that is not being held accountable for long wait times, fragmented care or questionable quality.

HR 4243 provide four times the funding for Choice, further harming veterans and the core capacity for the VA. Bill proponents are trying to hide the fact that funding VA health care is a zero sum game. Every dollar diverted to private care is one less dollar that the VA desperately needs to retain its capacity to be the primary provider and coordinator of care. H.R. 4243 would make that slush fund permanent: Section 106 would allow the Secretary to transfer funds from every other activity to the BRAC account.

We urge you to oppose H.R. 4243 so that Members of Congress can continue to fight for what veterans want and deserve by putting more doctors and nurses at the bedside and in the clinics, and allowing the VA to continue to deliver and coordinate exemplary and cost-effective veteran-centric care.

Thank you for considering our views.

Sincerely,

American Federation of Labor & Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO)
American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME)
American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE)
American Postal Workers Union (APWU)
Federal Education Association/National Education Association (FEA/NEA)
International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAMAW)
International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW)
International Federation of Professional & Technical Engineers (IFPTE)
International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF)
Laborers' International Union of North America (LIUNA)
Metal Trades Department, AFL-CIO (MTD)
Marine Engineers' Beneficial Association (MEBA)
National Association of Government Employees (NAGE)
National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC)
National Federation of Federal Employees (NFFE)
National Rural Letter Carriers' Association (NRLCA)
National Weather Service Employees Organization (NWSEO)
Patent Office Professional Association (POPA)
Professional Aviation Safety Specialists (PASS)
United Power Trades Organization (UPTO)
Union Veterans Council, AFL-CIO

