

## **Veterans Choice Program**

I am pleased to report that thanks to recent efforts to protect the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health care system, Congress followed the people's recommendations and included resources for new investment in VA clinics and medical professionals as part of legislation to **continue funding the veterans Choice program**.

On July 22, veterans were asked to contact their elected Representatives to help defeat a Choice funding extension bill in the House that contained no investment in the VA system, and also required cuts to other VA benefits in order to "pay for" veterans' health care delivered through the Choice program. That was simply unacceptable because ill and injured veterans have already "paid for" their health care through their service and sacrifice. Fortunately, within days veterans responded to the call for action by sending almost 7,000 e-mails to lawmakers protesting this proposal and days later, on July 24, that version of the legislation failed in the House vote.

Following further negotiations in Congress, including discussions with various veterans service organizations (VSOs), the legislation was rewritten to provide a more balanced approach to ensure veterans have access to quality medical care both inside VA and in the community. In addition to providing \$2.1 billion for 6 months of funding for the Choice Program-with no offsets required to "pay for" medical care services-the revised legislation also authorized 28 critical new leases for community-based outpatient clinics as well as new provisions to improve the recruitment, hiring and retention of quality health care professionals for the VA.

The final version of S. 114, the VA Choice and Quality Employment Act of 2017, unanimously passed the House on July 28, the Senate on August 1, and was presented to the President on August 7 for his approval.

As a result of veteran's efforts and support, enactment of this legislation will improve their access to quality medical care both inside VA and in the community. Looking ahead, VSOs will continue working with VA, Congress to further strengthen and modernize the VA health care system so that all enrolled veterans get the care they need, when and where they need it.

Again, thanks to all veterans for standing with the different VSOs to ensure that the men and women who served, particularly those injured and made ill from their service, continue to receive all the care and benefits they have earned and deserve.