



March 20, 2023

The Honorable Bernie Sanders
Chairman
Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Bill Cassidy, MD
Ranking Member
Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Sanders and Ranking Member Cassidy:

On February 16th, the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, Pensions (HELP) held a hearing “Examining Health Care Workforce Shortages: Where Do We Go from Here?” The hearing examined the causes of our nation’s current health care workforce shortages, and explored various legislative solutions to learn about ways to address these challenges. While the focus of the hearing was on the supply of physicians and nurses in this country, there are critical shortages of other health professionals that have a major impact on the lives of people with disabilities, including disabled veterans, which should be subsequent subjects of the committee’s attention.

The Consortium for Constituents with Disabilities (CCD) Veterans Task Force wishes to take this opportunity to share with you our thoughts about two elements of the health care system – home and community-based services (HCBS) and community mental health services - that are of particular importance to many veterans with disabilities. HCBS care can include a variety of health and human services e.g., home health therapies (physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech-language pathology), skilled nursing, personal care, durable medical equipment, and transportation.

CCD is the largest coalition of national organizations working together to advocate for federal public policy that ensures the self-determination, independence, empowerment, integration and inclusion of children and adults with disabilities in all aspects of society free from racism, ableism, sexism, and xenophobia, as well as LGBTQ+ based discrimination and religious intolerance. The Veterans Task Force concerns itself with issues that impact veterans with disabilities as people with disabilities and seeks to inform the broader community of disability stakeholders and policymakers about matters of concern to disabled veterans.

Recent testimony before the House and Senate Veterans Affairs Committees highlighted the value of direct support professionals in aiding veterans with disabilities to remain active members of their communities. Additionally, several veterans’ organizations emphasized the role that access to community health providers plays in supporting veterans struggling with depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injuries (TBI) and other mental health challenges.

Approximately 1 in 3 (36.5%) post-9/11 veterans self-report having received a TBI during their military service. An estimated 31.1% of U.S. adults experience an anxiety disorder at some point in their lives. However, this number is notably higher among post-9/11 veterans, with nearly half (46.7%) presenting with moderate to severe anxiety symptoms. And in a survey of these veterans in 2022, over half (54.9%) reported experiencing moderate to severe symptoms of depression in the prior two weeks. Veteran suicide remains disturbingly high. In 2020, the suicide rate for veterans was 57.3 percent higher than that of non-veteran adults. Two out of three veteran suicides are over 55 years of age. Fourteen of twenty veterans do not get care at a VA healthcare facility.¹

The VA employs far too few mental health clinicians to respond to the numbers of veterans in need of care. As a result, many of these veterans turn to mental health services in the community and, to be sure, Congress has responded by passing comprehensive mental health measures to reduce barriers to care for veterans in crisis. One such program is the Community Alignment Wounded Warrior Project which has been a consistent provider and advocate for a continuum of mental health programs – within and outside the VA - to help veterans and their families build resilience and overcome mental health struggles. This program brings together supports through a public health approach that coordinates action from all government as well as public-private partnerships to aid these veterans. Congressional support for programs such as this is essential to ensure all veterans, in particular those that are ineligible for VA services or do not use VA services nevertheless receive the necessary care owed to them.

Across the country, there is an increasing shortage of direct care workers, and a national effort is needed to expand and strengthen this workforce. Veterans with disabilities, like all people with disabilities, have the right to quality care in their homes. In a recent statement to the Senate Aging Committee, the CCD Long Term Services and Supports Task Force noted the dramatic exodus of direct support professionals from the field in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. They cited a 2022 survey of community-based disability service providers that found 83% of providers are turning away new referrals and 63% of providers are discontinuing programs and services—an 85.3% increase since the beginning of the pandemic.²

Even with existing VA home care programs, many veterans with significant disabilities struggle to hire direct care workers to supplement the efforts of their family or to fill in the gaps when VA caregiver program limits are reached. Significantly disabled veterans have been left without attendant services over several days because the home health agency with which the VA contracted had been unable to schedule a worker during that time. Other veterans have been forced to curtail their schedules to the point of going to bed at 7 pm because no homecare agency staff are available when needed or their spouses have been forced to leave the workforce to care

¹ Testimony of Lt. Gen. Michael S. Linnington (Ret.) Chief Executive Officer, Wounded Warrior Project, to Joint House and Senate VA Committee hearing, March 8, 2023, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/VR/VR00/20230308/115370/HHRG-118-VR00-Wstate-LinningtonM-20230308.pdf>

² Testimony of CCD Long-Term Services and Supports Task Force Co-chairs to U. S. Senate Special Committee on Aging, March 9, 2023, <https://c-c-d.org/fichiers/CCD-Senate-Aging-Committee-Testimony-3.9.2023.pdf>

for the veteran because direct care staffing in their areas is nonexistent. For spouses, such circumstances also cost them valuable retirement credit under Social Security.³

Increasing pay for essential caregivers is a necessary component of attracting and retaining a diverse set of people to provide HCBS but raising pay alone is not sufficient to solve the crisis we face. Utilizing multiple strategies such as raising public awareness about the need and value of caregiving jobs, providing prospective workers quality training, and developing caregiving as a sound career choice are a few of the other changes that could help turn this problem around.

Legislation such as the Supporting Our Direct Care Workforce and Family Caregivers Act and the Better Care, Better Jobs Act offer potential answers to these challenges. Among their provisions, these measures seek to expand the direct care labor force through better pay and working conditions and support for family caregivers through technical assistance and training.

The National Strategy to Support Family Caregivers developed by the Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Community Living (ACL) is an important component in the nation's efforts to expand access to long-term services and supports. By acknowledging the interrelationships of federal, state and local programs involved in family caregiving, the National Strategy offers additional insights into ways to serve veterans with disabilities and their families.

Members of Congress not directly involved with the committees with jurisdiction over the VA must nevertheless understand that many of the federal programs over which they have responsibility directly affect veterans with disabilities. As the committee continues to explore workforce issues, we hope it will direct its attention to this critical component of our health care system.

Should you or your staff need further information, please feel free to reach out to any of the cochairs of the CCD Veterans Task Force – Stephanie Flynt, National Disability Rights Network, at stephanie.flynt@ndrn.org, Julie Howell, Paralyzed Veterans of America, at julieh@pva.org or Susan Prokop, Paralyzed Veterans of America, at susanp@pva.org.

Signed:

CCD Veterans Task Force cochairs
American Music Therapy Association
American Speech-Language-Hearing Association
National Organization of Social Security Claimants' Representatives (NOSSCR)
RespectAbility
VetsFirst/United Spinal Association
National Disability Rights Network (NDRN)
National Association of Councils on Developmental Disabilities
ATRA
The Autistic Women and Nonbinary Network

Cc: Members, HELP Committee

³ Legislative Presentation of American Legion and Multiple VSOs to Joint House and Senate VA Committee hearing, March 1, 2023, <https://veterans.house.gov/calendar/eventsingle.aspx?EventID=6112>

