



47595 Watkins Island Square
Sterling, VA 20165
Phone: (703) 444-5587
Fax: (703) 444-5597
www.vanurse.org

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The Honorable Johnny Isakson
Chairman
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
412 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington D.C., 20510

Dear Chairman Isakson:

On behalf of the nearly 3,000 members of the Nurses Organization of Veterans Affairs (NOVA), we would like to offer our thoughts regarding the bills - S. 2646, Veterans Choice Improvement Act of 2016, and S. 2633, Improving Access to Care in the Community Act - before your Committee today.

NOVA believes that making Choice permanent at this time would be a mistake and that further review and oversight of the many issues occurring in the field is needed. We also believe that the veteran should be at the forefront as you consider all forms of non-VA/fee-based care.

Many of our members have called attention to the Choice Program and the myriad of problems that remain a part of its implementation. Confusion as to who is eligible, prolonged wait periods to even speak to a staff member to schedule an appointment, multiple referrals being made in the wrong specialty, and the time it takes to review requests for critically ill patients are just some of the concerns voiced by our members. The contractors must be held accountable and measures put in place for performance and timeliness of care and services.

NOVA nurses have spoken of being on the phone for hours trying to help veterans who have been denied a service or are being turned over to bill collectors because providers have not been paid. Authorizations and consults being returned or not scheduled for no reason leads to processing the veteran for said authorization all over again.

These are just a few examples of a program that may have been intended to fill gaps in service, but has in fact provided much more uncertainty for veterans seeking care at VA. We believe that Congress must focus its efforts on evaluating the program before moving forward. A thoughtful process involving all stakeholders must be done to close the gaps in service and realign care so that veterans are provided the services they have so richly earned.

Sincerely,

Sharon Johnson, MSN, RN-BC, President
Nurses Organization of Veterans Affairs (NOVA)