

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-4704

December 8, 2017

The Honorable David J. Shulkin, M.D.
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, Northwest
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Shulkin:

I write to you today to express my shock and disappointment at the direction you and your senior team initially chose for repurposing essential funding within the Department of Veterans Affairs (the Department). According to media reports and the statements of participants of a December 1 phone call with the Advisory Committee on Homeless Veterans, the Department announced a decision to move forward with a proposal that would strip essential funds for supportive services for the HUD-VA Supportive Housing Program, known as HUD-VASH. I also write to ask you to explain the comments you have made regarding that decision and to clarify to all regional Department employees that there is no change in policy.

Only a month ago, after first hearing accounts of this impending change, I joined my colleagues on the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies in a letter to you expressing our serious concern over the Department's rumored plan to convert a portion of Specific Purpose funds to General Purpose funds. The members of our Subcommittee urged you not to move forward with this plan until better understanding could be gained as to the intention and consequence of this action. I am gravely concerned that the Department appears not only to have ignored our request, but chose to proceed forward with this harmful plan even as we see the number of homeless veterans in our country rising.

Despite the significant strides we have made toward addressing the problem of homelessness amongst veterans, there is still a need to do so much more. On the same day your decision was reported, the release of the 2017 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress from the Department of Housing and Urban Development showed that the number of homeless veterans has increased from 2016, the first such increase since 2010. This report states that there are currently more than 40,000 veterans experiencing homelessness in our country. In my own home state of Washington, I was extremely troubled to see that there was a 41 percent increase in the number of veterans experiencing homelessness compared to 2016. I ask that you provide me with a comprehensive assessment of the reasons for this increase in my state, especially whether there have been any changes or reductions in Department services for homeless veterans in Washington.

In 2008, during my time as the chair of the Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee, I worked to restart the HUD-VASH program because I, like many Americans, know that this country has a responsibility to care for the brave men and women who served our country. Case management and supportive services coordinated and provided by the Department are a vital component of the HUD-VASH program's success. The more than 100,000 homeless veterans who have been served by this program include some of our nation's most vulnerable populations, including the chronically ill, mentally ill, and those struggling with substance abuse. Earlier this year, the Trump Administration put this program at risk when it proposed a 13 percent cut to the Department's partner agency in the program, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, in the President's budget request.

That attempt to undermine HUD-VASH was unacceptable, and this attempt is as well. The case management provided by VA is essential to assisting these veterans in navigating the complex housing market and coordinating access to clinical care and employment assistance. Without the invaluable support provided by VA case managers, many veterans may find themselves forced to sleep on the streets. By removing these services, the Department would gut the capacity and efficacy of one of the best tools it has in the fight to end veteran homelessness.

I echo the calls from the Subcommittee's previous letter that you unequivocally reverse this action as I consider your public statement and assertions in the wake of the public outrage regarding your initial course of action to be perplexing. On December 6, 2017, the Department issued a press release quoting you as saying that "there will be absolutely no change in the funding to support our homeless programs," which seemed to be a welcome reversal of the change. Yet you continued on to say that homeless program funding will not be shifted to the Choice program, which is language that you have also included in other correspondence. I am unaware of any assertion that Choice was in any way involved with the Department's initial decision, causing me to question whether this extraneous statement is an attempt to provide the Department flexibility to shift homeless money to non-Choice programs. I trust that is not the case, as such a move would greatly compound the seriousness of the current situation.

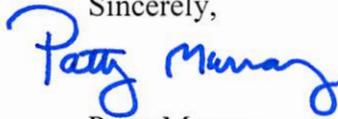
Moving forward, it is essential that our veterans, Congress, and stakeholders providing veterans with housing and supportive services have a full opportunity to review and provide advice to any Departmental proposal for funding reallocations. I ask again that you provide information on the types of programs designated as "Secretarial priorities" that will receive the five percent funding shift from each VISN. Additionally, a funding allocation plan should be submitted to the Subcommittee to allow for informed decision making on appropriations for these programs in the future. If the Department does not immediately fulfill the requests of that letter and begin operating with more transparency, I will seek dramatic restrictions on the authority Congress grants the Department to reprogram its funding in order to ensure the federal government is always acting in the best interests of veterans

Finally, the haphazard formulation of the now-abandoned policy change, combined with its sudden and clumsy announcement and near-immediate retraction, has caused substantial concern and confusion among providers. It is likely that this confusion extends to Department employees

working in the field. It is important that you clearly communicate to all regional Department employees that they should not be engaging in the reallocation of any Specific Purpose funds for homelessness services.

At a recent event in Washington, D.C., you and other members of the Trump Administration toured an apartment building that utilizes the HUD-VASH program and now houses over 60 veterans. During that visit you stated your commitment, "to continue our efforts until we get every veteran off the streets to find a home such as this." I expect the Department's actions to mirror that commitment. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Patty Murray". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "P" and a long, sweeping underline.

Patty Murray
United States Senator