

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

July 16, 2018

The Honorable Richard C. Shelby
Chairman
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
S-128 U.S. Capitol Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Rodney Frelinghuysen
Chairman
Committee on Appropriations
United States House of Representatives
H-305 U.S. Capitol Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Patrick J. Leahy
Vice-Chairman
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
S-146A U.S. Capitol Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Nita Lowey
Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations
United States House of Representatives
1016 Longworth HOB
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairmen Shelby and Frelinghuysen, Vice-Chairman Leahy, and Ranking Member Lowey:

We write regarding the conference committee for H.R. 5895, the Energy and Water, Legislative Branch and Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations Act, 2019 (the “minibus”). As conference negotiations begin, we urge you remain steadfast to the principles of good government and to prioritize funding for the programs authorized in the VA MISSION Act (P.L. 115-182) within the recently increased nondefense discretionary spending limits.

On June 6th, President Trump signed into law the VA MISSION Act, which created a new VA community care program to replace the ailing VA Choice Program beginning in 2019. Almost immediately after passage, an unfortunate effort began to further increase the Budget Control Act’s (BCA) nondefense discretionary spending caps. Proponents of the effort argue that it is needed to ensure adequate care for our veterans. We disagree. This issue really comes down to whether we are willing to prioritize care for our veterans within existing spending limits.

Just this past February, Congress passed the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018 that raised the fiscal year 2019 nondefense discretionary cap by \$68 billion, bringing the revised cap level to \$597 billion. This is 13 percent more than the cap that was in place at the beginning of this year. According to the Congressional Budget Office, \$1-2 billion will be needed in fiscal year 2019 to fund the new programs authorized in the VA MISSION Act. It is entirely reasonable to

expect that Congress can find the \$1-2 billion needed within the overall \$597 billion spending limit.

During Senate consideration of the minibus, an amendment was filed to further increase nondefense spending. The amendment would also have allowed for increasingly larger cap adjustments in fiscal years 2020 and 2021. The amendment was not adopted or even debated. A similar effort to increase the existing caps was also rejected during House consideration of the bill. We strongly urge you to oppose in conference committee negotiations adoption of this provision, or any other language that seeks to increase discretionary spending caps beyond current levels. Air dropping language that was not supported in either chamber into a conference report is not an ideal way to legislate and contrary to our shared goal for a fair and equitable appropriations process.

Federal spending is a reflection of our priorities as a nation, and our priority here should be to set aside \$1-2 billion within the \$68 billion increase for fiscal year 2019 to provide our veterans with the quality healthcare that they have earned through their service. Providing America's veterans with access to quality healthcare and serving as responsible stewards of taxpayer dollars is not an either-or proposition. Congress can – and should – do both. We should care for our veterans in a fiscally responsible manner, which is the best way to ensure their long-term care, as well as the care for veterans of our next generation.

We thank you in advance for your work and attentive consideration of this request.

Sincerely,



Michael B. Enzi
Chairman
Senate Committee on the Budget



Steve Womack
Chairman
House Committee on the Budget

Cc: Members of the Conference Committee on H.R. 5895, the Energy and Water, Legislative Branch and Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations Act, 2019