

Veterans Affairs to close more than 1,110 facilities

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Last week Veterans Affairs Secretary David Shulkin told the US House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations that his department is considering closing more than 1,110 facilities in an effort to privatize veteran health care.

The VA said it found more than 430 vacant and 735 underutilized building that cost the federal government about \$25 million every year. Instead of building new and improved medical centers, Shulkin told the committee he is only interested in working with private for-profit hospitals.

According to an internal agency document obtained by the Associated Press, the VA noted that about 57 percent of all its facilities were more than 50 years old. Of the 431 facilities it said were vacant, most were built 90 or more years ago.

Shulkin told legislators that the VA would work with Congress to prioritize which buildings will be closed and was considering whether to allow the Pentagon to use a process called Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) to shut down its underused military bases.

He told the House committee, "Whether BRAC is a model that we should take a look, we're beginning that discussion with members of Congress," adding, "We want to stop supporting our use of maintenance of buildings we don't need, and we want to reinvest that in buildings we know have capital needs."

Shulkin is a holdover from the Obama Administration and was the only Trump cabinet member to be endorsed unanimously by both Democrats and Republicans. He is a supporter of the so-called Veterans Choice program, authored by Senators Bernie Sanders (Democrat, Vermont) and John McCain (Republican, Arizona), in which veterans who live 40 miles or more from a VA center can seek alternate care at a private facility.

President Trump extended the program last month and Shulkin told the Committee he supports its continuation and is working on a broader proposal to expand the program. According to a government report, privatizing VA health care would cost up to \$100 billion a year.

The program began in 2014 after a widely publicized scandal broke out at a VA hospital in Arizona where delays in treatments led to at least 40 preventable deaths. The news followed revelations that a VA benefits center in Philadelphia manipulated old disability claims to appear new. It is not uncommon for veterans, many of whom suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), to be forced to wait for months at a time before receiving medical help.

The political furor that erupted over the VA scandal did not lead to more health care or government assistance for veterans, but the opposite. It provided justification for privatizing the VA entirely. Early February saw a report by the department's inspector general that found that the 2014 "Veterans Choice and Accountability Act", which set aside \$16 billion to hire more doctors and staff and fund private health care, did not cut wait times. The report found that the approval process for private care was so poor that the average wait time for a veteran to see a doctor was still 45 days.

During the 2016 election campaign Trump called the VA a "disaster" and "the most corrupt agency in the United States." At a news conference last May he declared his support for expanding private care for veterans saying in his typically ignorant manner, "What it has to be is when somebody is online and they say it's a seven-day wait, that person's going to walk across the street to a private doctor, be taken care of, we're going to pay the bill."

Shulkin, undoubtedly aware of popular hostility to

Trump proposals, was forced to say at his confirmation hearing, “The Department of Veterans Affairs will not be privatized under my watch.” It should be noted that before taking his current position as head of the VA, Shulkin headed several private health companies, including the Beth Israel Medical Center in New York and the University of Pennsylvania Health System.

Speaking on CBS’ “This Morning,” Shulkin again declared last week, “In no way are we seeking to privatize the VA.” While the Trump administration has pledged a six percent increase in VA funding, Shulkin made it known that the agency, the government’s second largest with 370,000 employees, will have to operate more efficiently and that budget increases will not be guaranteed in the future.

The VA recently announced a hiring restriction on roughly 4,000 positions, despite the lifting of the federal hiring freeze, and also left open the possibility of “near-term” and “long-term workforce reductions.”

The government’s plans to close 1,100 “underused” facilities and eventually privatize the rest are a slap in the face to veterans. While the political and media establishment heap praise on veterans, their real attitude toward vets is demonstrated by the neglect and mistreatment they receive once their terms of service are completed. Forced to kill or be killed in neo-colonial wars of aggression in the Middle East, Central Asia and elsewhere, many working class veterans bear deep psychological scars. Once home they face a future of unemployment or low wage jobs, driving many into drug abuse or even suicide.

According to recent data from the VA, roughly 20 veterans commit suicide every day. In 2014, more than 7,400 veterans took their own lives, accounting for 18 percent of all suicides in the United States despite the fact that veterans comprise only nine percent of the US population.

Trump’s budget for the VA will total \$180 billion for fiscal year 2018 while the budget for the Pentagon will total \$603 billion. The new budget will leave more money for expanded wars overseas leaving less money for health care for veterans and other vital services.

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