

# The Register-Guard

## Elimination of VA system would be a huge loss

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A group in the Trump administration is reportedly working on a plan to eliminate the Department of Veterans Affairs health care system.

Right-wing groups have long targeted the VA for cuts or elimination. The Cato Institute, for example, notes that the health care system has added about 100,000 employees since 2000. That is about a 50 percent increase — which sounds generous, but during the same period there has been a 70 percent increase in veterans receiving VA health care.

Human resources have not kept pace with demand, which may help explain the waiting lists that have made news in recent years.

Nonetheless, small-government Republicans have taken aim at the 280,000 or so VA employees' salaries and benefits that could be eliminated by doing away with the Veterans Health Administration. That temptation to cut costs may override promises to "support our troops."

The plan might be to issue veterans vouchers for care. According to Value Penguin, a cost comparison site, the average cost of health insurance is just under \$3,000 per year. The VA allots just under \$2,700 a year for a routine medical patient. Under most voucher systems, the patient pays the difference.

But who would pay for the uninsurable veterans who make up the bulk of the VA's mandated workload?

Patients in the VA's Priority Group 1 are those with service-connected injuries or illnesses that are 50 percent or more disabling, or those who cannot work due to service-connected disabilities. Their care, on average, costs about \$12,000 a year.

Veterans in Priority Groups 2 and 3 have lesser levels of disability and cost about \$5,500 each to care for. Priority Group 4 is made up of veterans whose disabilities are so severe that they are housebound and receive their care there, for more than \$22,000 each per year.

In fact, almost all veterans who make up the mandated workload cost so much to care for that if they were insured by private companies, they would substantially drive up the cost of insurance to the rest of us. We saw this when the patients getting insurance through the Affordable Care Act were blended into insurance risk pools.

The VA is able to purchase drugs, expensive equipment and other supplies on a bulk basis, getting deep discounts. Private industry does not have a pharmacy system to replace the VA, eliminating that discount. In fact, it will cost private industry much more to care for veterans than it currently costs the VA. But we will lose a whole lot more.

About one third of all American doctors in one survey reported that they received post-graduate (residency) training at a VA facility affiliated with one of America's top 100 medical schools. Many nurses, x-ray technicians, social workers, psychologists and other health care providers receive part or all of their training at VA facilities. Without the VA we will have fewer health care professionals, and costs will go up.

VA researchers are responsible for the discovery of AIDS, dental implants, multiple organ transplantation and partial liver transplantation. In fact, the VA has the best network for clinical trials of new drugs.

The VA has major researchers working at 115 of its facilities, looking for the next cure or treatment that we will have no idea started there. VA researchers have won every major science award, including the Nobel Prize.

This network of scientists will be impossible to replace.

Most importantly, we will lose the Pam Murphys of the world. Pam was an employee of mine when I worked at the VA in California's San Fernando Valley. She was the widow of Audie Murphy. Pam had many offers of employment that would have paid far more than she earned at the VA. I had to remind Pam to take lunch breaks and to go home on time in the evening. She was the most dedicated patient representative ever. She would go toe-to-toe with doctors, nurses and administrators (myself included) to get her veterans what she thought they deserved.

Pam is gone now. But most veterans will tell you that there is someone like her helping them navigate through clinics and hospitals that can be confusing when you are not at your best. These people live Lincoln's call for us to "Care for he who has borne the battle."

When we lose the VA, we will lose all these Pams. And we will lose the knowledge that someone was making sure we kept our promises to those who gave up their health and well-being serving us.