

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

December 15, 2020

The Honorable Robert Wilkie
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, D.C., 20402

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We write to express our concerns about prematurely resuming the collection of veterans' debts related to disability, education, and medical benefits administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), which have been suspended since earlier this year.

We commend the VA for its decision to suspend debt collections at the start of the pandemic, and we understand the difficulties of developing plans to return to normal operations even as conditions on the ground are changing by the day. However, in light of the currently deteriorating COVID-19 metrics – with cases, hospitalizations, deaths, and income insecurity on the rise – we believe your decision to resume collections in January of 2021 needs to be revisited.

We are concerned that the Department seems to have developed two different sets of plans for the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) and Veterans Health Administration (VHA) to resume collection of their respective debts, and that veterans are not receiving clear, uniform communication about these plans.

For instance, it is our understanding that VHA plans to resume debt collection on January 1, 2021, and veterans will have up to 90 days to either dispute the debt, request relief, or repay all medical copays that they have accrued since April 4, 2020. At a December 9, 2020, hearing of the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs, Dr. Richard Stone, the VHA's Executive in Charge, expressed uncertainty as to whether the economy will have stabilized sufficiently to make VHA's planned resumption of debt collection in January appropriate. It seems virtually certain that the economy will not be in a better place three weeks from now than it is now. Nevertheless, last week, VHA started informing veterans of their outstanding balances for medical copays and of the VA's intent to require veterans to start paying them at the start of the new year.

On the other hand, we've received indications that VBA has developed somewhat more compassionate plans to ease veterans' debt repayment burden, including automatically extending the repayment timeframe for compensation and pension debts to 36 months and deferring credit bureau reporting until October 2021. It appears that VA is limiting this approach to debts related to compensation and pension benefits rather than applying it uniformly across the Department to

include *all* debts related to medical, disability, and education and benefits. Such information has not been clearly communicated to congressional stakeholders, but most importantly, it has not been clearly communicated to all impacted veterans.

While veteran unemployment is down from its peak of 12% over the summer, it is still double the rate it was prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Our nation's veterans, like all Americans, are continuing to struggle with job losses, housing and bill payments, and simply feeding their families, while also budgeting for holiday season expenses. Perhaps now more than ever, it is imperative that they be able to continue receiving the care they need and the benefits they've earned. Without clarity on VA's debt collection approach and clear, comprehensive communication of this information, however, veterans cannot adequately plan or budget for repayment of their VA debts while managing all the other anxieties the pandemic has created.

With that in mind, we urge VA to consider continuing its deferral of veterans' debts while we continue battling the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and regain some measure of economic and employment normalcy, and to more clearly and comprehensively define and communicate to veterans and congressional stakeholders its plans to resume debt collection when such collection is appropriate.

Thank you for your consideration of our request.

Sincerely,



JULIA BROWNLEY
Member of Congress

/s/
TERRI A. SEWELL
Member of Congress

/s/
RAÚL M. GRIJALVA
Member of Congress

/s/
TOM COLE
Member of Congress

/s/
DONALD S. BEYER JR.
Member of Congress



CHRIS PAPPAS
Member of Congress

/s/
BARBARA LEE
Member of Congress

/s/
BOBBY L. RUSH
Member of Congress

/s/
ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON
Member of Congress

/s/
SUSAN WILD
Member of Congress

/s/
PETER A. DeFAZIO
Member of Congress

/s/
AUMUA AMATA C. RADEWAGEN
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