

Save the VA. Veterans' lives depend on it | Opinion

[Jersey Journal Guest Columnist](#)

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Former Veterans Affairs Secretary David Shulkin speaks at a news conference at the Washington Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Washington last March. (AP Photo)

By Joseph Hirsch

In May of 1968 I was sent to Vietnam, where I translated intercepted communiques during the war. The horrors of war I witnessed changed me forever. Since I returned home, I have worked to end war and for social justice.

In Vietnam, I, like millions of Vietnamese and many other American soldiers, was exposed to Agent Orange. Decades later, the VA linked that exposure to my diabetes. Right now there is a push to get vets out of the VA system and into the private sector medical industry. But the private sector is not prepared to care for vets. Private sector doctors do not understand the unique medical needs of vets, including war trauma, battle induced hearing loss or toxin exposure such as Agent Orange.

[A recent RAND study](#) of New York doctors showed only 16 percent asked about occupational or military exposures such as Agent Orange. The same report found just 20 percent of doctors even asked their patients if they had spent time in the military.

While I may suffer from chronic diabetes because of Agent Orange, I am one of the luckier ones. Many people exposed to Agent Orange ended with Parkinson's disease, devastating cancers or they saw their children born with birth defects.

This year, I returned to Vietnam where my heart was broken when we visited a hospital where children with serious birth defects linked to Agent Orange live out their lives. It also saddens me to say that currently children of male American vets who were exposed to Agent Orange are exempt from receiving VA benefits. The VA knows just how common Agent Orange exposure is in vets and has a comprehensive health care program designed specifically for those exposed to or sickened by Agent Orange.

The VA is the largest integrated health care system in the U.S. It is a system designed by vets and for vets. The majority of those who work for the VA are vets themselves. They understand the unique and complex needs of vets.

Importantly, [a recent study found](#) that pushing veterans out of the VA may end up costing more taxpayer money and mean lower quality of care for vets as the private sector system isn't prepared to meet the needs of more patients.

In addition, most VA workers are protected by unions. As a retired postal worker and a longtime labor activist I know how important it is to have union workers be able to push for changes to make things safer and better. Union nurses at the VA have been able to do just that. They have fought for safe patient handling protections and nurses' involvement in safety inspections.

Importantly, they have made sure that a nurse can report unsafe conditions without facing retaliation. If something is not right where I am getting health care, you know I want to be sure that someone - like a nurse - feels backed up and safe enough to say something.

Right now the VA is under attack. President Trump kicked out the former Secretary of Veterans Affairs David Shulkin. Shulkin opposes efforts to push vets out of the VA and into the private health care sector, a move he says will hurt vets. [In a piece published in the New York Times](#) Shulkin wrote, "I am convinced that privatization is a political issue aimed at rewarding select people and companies with profits, even if it undermines care for veterans."

We must fight against this effort. Pushing vets out of the VA means leaving them to the wolves of the private sector, where sickness is seen as a way to make money and vets will no longer get care from those who understand their needs and how best to address their illnesses.

I have worked hard since I came back from my deployment in Phu Bai, Vietnam to fight against the forces that seek to exploit people. I continue to stand up against the American war machine, and I stand up for my brothers and sisters in the labor movement, now I am standing up for myself and for all my fellow veterans.

I know, I am standing up for what is right, when I say we must save the VA.

Joseph Hirsch is a Vietnam veteran and a resident of Jersey City.

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