**THE VETERANS ADMINISTRATION IS BEING PRIVATIZED BY THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION?**

As one of nine million veterans who receive health care at the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) every year, I’m being notified this month of expanded access to private sector care. Because of the VA MISSION Act of 2018, and its Veterans Community Care Program, which will be launched on June 6th, I can choose to get care outside the VA if my drive time to, or wait time at the VA, is too long. I receive a constant stream of advisories from the VHA and learn from VA Secretary Robert Wilkie– via Fox News -- that my veterans healthcare system is undergoing a grand “revolution.” I am told that I will have greater “choice.” As a VHA patient I will now be “empowered” to visit private sector doctors and hospitals and finally be able to experience the kind of healthcare most average Americans enjoy.

Some of my fellow veterans may welcome this news. I, however, do not. My fear is that this new effort to outsource veterans’ care to non VA providers represents the kind of privatization of public services I’ve experienced over my long career as a teacher in the Milwaukee public school system. I worry that the VHA will be starved of resources and staff as funds are shifted to private doctors and hospitals. I am concerned that my first choice – care at the Veterans Health Administration – will, in the name of choice, disappear.

As a 100 percent disabled veteran, this would be a disaster. In 1968, as a 20- year- old Navy Corpsman attached to the United States Marines in Vietnam, my right hip was blown away. I had been in Vietnam for only five weeks. It took five days for a helicopter to evacuate me to a field hospital near Da Nang. Eventually I was cared for in a hospital in Japan before I was flown to Bethesda Naval Hospital in Maryland, where I spent nearly a year in a body cast. Over the past 50 years, I have had 25 surgeries, and suffered with osteomyelitis – a serious chronic bone infection.

My injury has led me on a five decade journey through the Veterans Health Administration that was a literal hellhole back in the 1970s and 80s. But today it has become a magnificent place of healing. For the past twenty years, I have received the kind of holistic, coordinated care that I have yet to find in the private sector. VHA staff – from the clerks who book my appointments, to my primary care doctor, and medical specialists as well as psychologists and physical therapists, understand my experiences as a combat veteran. They get that we, as veterans, have experienced things that are alien to most civilian doctors, nurses. They have helped me deal with PTSD that has never left me, as well as the pain that still haunts me.

With help from the VA’s integrated pain team, I entered an eight week program in which I was introduced to neurologists, psychologists, orthopedists, and physical therapists. They explained how I could use a wide variety of techniques to deal with my pain that didn’t include opioid narcotics. Plus, I recently worked with a VA psychologist who gave me the tools I needed to manage pain without the use of narcotics.

Although many in Congress and the media seem to think that the key to veteran “empowerment” lies in the private sector healthcare system, my experiences outside the VA have not been reassuring. I received major surgery on my hip at St. Mary’s Hospital in Rochester, Minnesota back in 1990. The surgeon who performed the operation on me did an excellent job, except for follow up care, which was a nightmare. When I told him I was disappointed with his post-operative care, he asked me what he should do about it. “I’m a surgeon,” he said. “I don’t have time to care for patients after surgery.” Anyone who has had major surgery knows how important post-operative care is for healing.

I have also watched as my non-veteran friends and relatives struggle with treatment delays and denials, bill collectors, and high insurance premiums including co-pays. Their experiences have filled me with dread rather than envy of care outside the VHA.

When some veterans groups, such as Disabled American Veterans and Vietnam Veterans of America, warn that the VA Mission Act is a stealth attempt at VA privatization, Secretary Wilkie insists that it is not. “We’re just giving veterans what they can’t get at the VA,” he told Fox News. I don’t believe him.

As a veteran, I want to see the VA continue to improve, not be dismantled. I want Secretary Wilkie to fill the VHA’s 40,000 vacant staff positions. I want Congress to allocate more money for the VA, not take it away. I do not want the VA to become just another insurer. I want the VA to continue its mission of service to care for all of those – male and female, young and old, combatants and non-combatants -- who have served and sacrificed so much for their country.