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United States Senate

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SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING

October 21, 2020

The Honorable Robert Wilkie
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Mr. Secretary:

I write to request that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) take immediate action to improve the rollout of the recent expansion of the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (PCAFC). The implementation has led to significant confusion in Arizona and across the nation, and it is critical for the VA to work with veterans, their caregivers, and stakeholders to ensure those in need understand the new program and obtain assistance.

Arizona veterans and their caregivers have been waiting far too long for the expansion of the VA's Family Caregiver Assistance program. Congress passed the VA MISSION Act in 2018 to extend the support already afforded to many post-9/11 veterans and caregivers to veterans serving before September 11, 2001. This expansion has the potential to serve many deserving Arizona veterans. Yet Congress, veteran service organizations, and the veteran community received little notice when the VA launched this long-awaited expansion on October 1, 2020. As a result, many veterans and caregivers are struggling to understand whether they are eligible for this expanded benefit.

I am particularly troubled by stakeholder reports that VA medical centers are providing inaccurate and unclear information about key aspects of the program, including eligibility criteria. The VA has had more than sufficient time to develop a coordinated outreach plan that includes a proactive strategy to identify and enroll eligible veterans and their caregivers. The lack of such a plan is frustrating overburdened caregivers and the veterans they care for.

I am also disappointed that the VA's implementing regulations for the PCAFC expansion will result in the exclusion of previously eligible participants by specifically limiting the Family Caregiver Assistance program to certain veterans rated as 70 percent service-connected and above. Such restrictions unfairly limit program eligibility and oversimplify the complex support many caregivers must provide. My office continues to hear that the regulations were finalized

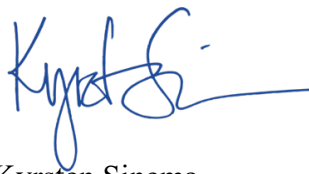
without meaningful input from stakeholders and include overly broad language outlining care requirements. Without clear guidance and outreach, veterans and caregivers have been left wondering if they qualify for this program.

You and your leadership team continually emphasize the VA's commitment to strong customer service. However, you have not met that standard with the Family Caregivers expansion rollout. I therefore urge you to immediately take the following steps:

1. Launch a coordinated outreach plan to inform veterans and their caregivers about the PCAFC expansion and its eligibility criteria, who should apply, and how to do so. This should include coordination between the VA central office and VA medical centers to ensure veterans nationwide are receiving the same information. The plan should also engage veteran service organizations and other stakeholders as partners.
2. Use current VA data to proactively identify and notify veterans supported by caregivers who are likely eligible for this program based on current criteria, including era of service and service-connected disability rating. Once notified, the VA should then assist them with program enrollment.
3. Create a system to assist veterans and their caregivers who are not eligible for the program or who lose eligibility based on the new criteria. This assistance should include connecting to VA programs and community partners where applicable.

Thank you for your attention to this critical matter. Veterans and their families have earned these benefits and have waited far too long for this assistance. I remain committed to working with the VA to ensure the expanded Caregivers Program is a success.

Sincerely,



Kyrsten Sinema
United States Senator