# Independent Budget to Trump: Exempt VA

## 'Even a 90-day hiring freeze would result in more veterans waiting longer to get critical benefits they rely on for their financial security'

Jan 31, 2017




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The Honorable Donald J. Trump
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Trump:

As leaders of The Independent Budget (IB) veterans service organizations (Disabled

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American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America and Veterans of Foreign Wars), and on behalf of our combined 2.6 million members, we write to respectfully request your support to contemplate the broader effect of the executive order calling for a 90-day federal hiring freeze and allow the entire Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to continue recruiting and hiring sufficient staff to meet the needs of America's veterans.

As you know, the past few years have been a challenging time for VA, both for its health care and benefits systems. However, as a result of significant Congressional oversight, enactment of new legislation and internal VA transformation, there has been a marked increase in both the quality and timeliness of VA health care and benefits. As these reforms have taken hold, the number of veterans, family members and survivors seeking access has increased. In order to keep up with the rising demand, Congress infused VA with new resources to fill thousands of open positions as well as expand staff to meet critical needs of veterans in areas such as mental health, homelessness, claims and appeals processing. While we are encouraged by the recent news that most clinical positions have been exempted from the hiring freeze, many of non-clinical but nonetheless critical VA positions would remain vacant under this executive order. Of course, not every Veterans Health Administration program may need to hire additional staff, and in fact there are some that may be able to reduce staff, particularly where redundant administrative functions and layers of management can be replaced by clinical staff who serve veterans at the bedside. That said, we believe those decisions should be made by the Secretary and his senior staff without any restrictions from a hiring freeze.

Demand for VA benefits is also increasing. The number of veterans filing claims for disability compensation due to injuries and illnesses incurred in service continues to rise, with about 1.3 million claims processed last year. Despite significant gains in VA's productive capacity resulting from modern technology and automation, the backlog of claims, which had fallen by more than 80% over the past five years, has slowly started to rise again as almost 100,000 veterans are now waiting more than 125 days for their benefits. The number of appeals of claims has risen to over 450,000 and can now take upwards of 3 years for a final decision. In addition, more veterans are applying to VA's vocational rehabilitation program for assistance in preparing for and finding a job or starting a business. VA's educational assistance and home loan guaranty programs continue to help hundreds of thousands of veterans and family members every year. With a 10% annual attrition rate for federal employees, a hiring freeze would actually reduce VA's workforce and thereby significantly decrease its ability to provide even the current level of services and benefits, much less increase to meet rising demand. Unfortunately, even a 90-day hiring freeze would result in more veterans waiting longer to get critical benefits they rely on for their financial security.

We recognize the intention of this executive order is to have every federal department and agency conduct a thorough review of their personnel needs before your new administration

makes longer term decisions. However, VA has already received the most intense scrutiny of any cabinet department over the past few years and Congress – in a bipartisan manner – has repeatedly authorized VA to increase staffing for both its health care and benefits programs.

Mr. President, knowing of your consistent strong statements of support for America's veterans, we would respectfully ask that you modify or clarify the executive order to exempt the entire Department of Veterans Affairs from this or any future hiring freeze. We look forward to working closely with you and, once he is confirmed, Secretary Shulkin, over the next four years to fulfill our promises to the men and women who served.

Respectfully,



David W. Riley
National Commander
Disabled American Veterans



Al Kovach Jr.
National President

Paralyzed Veterans of America



Brian Duffy
Commander-in-Chief
Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States

Cc. Hon. Robert D. Snyder, Acting Secretary of Veterans Affairs
Hon. Paul Ryan, Speaker of the House
Hon. Nancy Pelosi, House Minority Leader
Sen. Mitch McConnell, Senate Majority Leader
Sen. Charles Schumer, Senate Minority Leader

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