



Commissioned Officers Association of the U.S. Public Health Service

July 14, 2017

The Hon. Johnny Isakson
Chairman
Veterans Affairs Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Hon. Jon Tester
Ranking Member
Veterans Affairs Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Isakson and Ranking Member Tester:

We are a non-profit association that since 1951 has represented the interests of the Commissioned Corps of the United States Public Health Service. These uniformed officers comprise what is perhaps our country's best-kept secret when it comes to a group of professionals who are prepared to respond on a military-quick basis to public health disasters in our country, whether those disasters are natural or manmade. PHS teams have, in fact, responded over 800 times in the past ten years alone.

Providing a ready response to immediate public health needs is the reason the Commissioned Corps of the U.S. Public Health Service was created in 1889. Beginning initially as an all-physician group, this uniformed service quickly expanded, and through the ensuing 128 years it has come to embrace every category of public health specialty. These officers are formed into teams which can deploy as soon as twelve hours after they are alerted.

When they are not deployed, however, these officers have what we refer to as "day jobs." The largest number of them, over 1900, are clinicians within the Indian Health Service. The second largest number are stationed at the Food and Drug Administration, where they conduct studies and analyses of medicines and medical devices, working alongside their civilian colleagues. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is the third largest employer of PHS officers, with close to 1000 uniformed officers assigned there. Until recently the acting Director of the CDC was a Rear Admiral physician in the USPHS. The fourth largest number of PHS officers, some 800 total, are assigned to billets within the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

Other officers provide healthcare to the US Coast Guard and to NOAA officers. The Defense Department has its share of officers, as do the National Park Service and the Department of Agriculture. Indeed, PHS officers are assigned to some two dozen federal departments and agencies. The department that is conspicuously missing from the listing above is Veterans Affairs. Despite the fact that all PHS officers are, by federal law, veterans, there have not been full-time billets opened for PHS officers at the VA. As the association that represents close to 4500 active duty PHS officers (out of a total active duty population of just over 6500), we can tell you that there are many—perhaps hundreds—of PHS officers who would very much like to serve our country's veterans by working at a VA clinic or hospital.

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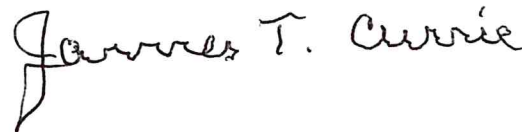
We understand that the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) earlier this year under which a handful (fewer than six) PHS officers will be assigned to VA clinical positions. As we are not privy to the contents of the MOU, we don't know whether it calls for such a limited number of PHS officer assignments to the VA or whether this small number is generated by some other forces. We understand that there has been some reluctance within the Department of HHS to fully embrace VA billets because of the fear that officers might leave a key HHS entity—the Indian Health Service—and go to the VA. We are completely sympathetic to this fear.

As we read the proposed language in this bill, we see nothing that would preclude any new MOU between the VA and HHS from including a provision that would open VA billets only to officers not currently serving in the Indian Health Service. The inclusion of such a provision would presumably allay the fear that emanates from within HHS that the Indian Health Service would be stripped of its clinicians if VA billets were opened to PHS officers.

As the one association that exclusively represents Commissioned Corps USPHS officers, we are continually pushing for new opportunities for our members to serve their country. We believe that veterans serving veterans is a natural relationship. We, in fact, reached out to then-Under Secretary Shulkin in December 2015 and raised with him the possibility of having PHS officers assigned to the VA. Our enthusiasm for the opening of VA billets was only slightly-mollified by what is apparently the limited nature of the current MOU.

We are therefore completely supportive of section 207 of the *Better Workforce for Veterans Act of 2017* (S. 1325).

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James T. Currie". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial 'J'.

Col. James T. Currie, USA (ret.), Ph.D.
Executive Director