

March 28, 2023

The Honorable John Carter
Chair
Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Debbie Wasserman-Shultz
Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Patty Murray
Chair
Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable John Boozman
Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chair Carter, Ranking Member Wasserman-Schultz, Chair Murray, and Ranking Member Boozman:

On behalf of our 159,000 members, the American Dental Association (ADA) writes to urge that your committees provide the increase in resources and administrative support needed for Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Dentistry (VA Dentistry) to meet the dental care needs of all eligible veterans. We respectfully request that you provide \$1.25 billion to VA Dentistry and direct the VA not to allocate this money elsewhere within the agency. This amount is \$50 million above the FY 2023 enacted funding level.

We also request that, in order to ensure that the Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Dentistry has the authority and resources to provide outstanding care for veterans, you provide guidance to the VA in report language that the Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Dentistry be at the same executive level as other Assistant Under Secretaries at the VA, and reports directly to the Under Secretary.

Oral health is essential to the overall health of veterans, and the funding of VA Dentistry and the Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Dentistry's executive level authority, resources, and staff should reflect our shared commitment to veterans' oral health.

Support for VA Dentistry

While only around fifteen percent of the more than nine million veterans currently enrolled in VA health care are eligible for VA dental benefits, the number of eligible veterans has risen at an exponential rate relative to the increase in resources for VA Dentistry. VA dentists provide outstanding, comprehensive care, and the ADA applauds VA Dentistry for overseeing the care of over 600,000 veterans in Fiscal Year 2023. However, because the funding and resources for VA Dentistry has not kept up with the increase in veterans eligible for VA dental benefits, real access to care is threatened by VA Dentistry's lack of funding and resources. Current funding and resources are not adequate for the care of all veterans currently eligible for VA dental benefits, and do not match the commitment we share to veterans' oral health. In order to turn eligibility for VA dental benefits into true access to the great dental care provided by VA Dentistry, Congress should increase funding for VA Dentistry to \$1.25 billion.

VA Dentistry does not have budget authority for the President's line item for dental services and the dental funding appropriated in the budget is added to the VA Health care funding stream and released to facilities through the Veterans Equitable Resource Allocation (VERA) process. Congress should set aside dedicated funding for VA Dentistry so that the money it appropriates for VA Dentistry is not used elsewhere within the VA.

Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Dentistry

Title 38 U.S.C 7306 states that one of the Under Secretaries for Health "shall be a qualified doctor of dental surgery or dental medicine who shall be directly responsible to the Under Secretary for Health for the operation of the Dental Service." However, the current head of VA Dentistry is an Assistant Under Secretary (AUSH), reporting to a Deputy AUSH in Clinical Operations. This, in effect, is a reverse reporting structure where the AUSH for dentistry reports to a Deputy AUSH in another service. The Deputy AUSH for Clinical Services reports to the AUSH for Clinical Services. The AUSH for Clinical Services reports to the Deputy Under Secretary for Health working under the Under Secretary for Health. These thick layers of bureaucracy and management on top of the head of VA Dentistry create the appearance of a diminution of dental care within the VA. ADA urges that Congress include report language in the Fiscal Year 2024 MilCon-VA Appropriations Bill that instructs the VA to restore the head of the office of Veterans Affairs (VA) Dentistry to directly reporting to the Under Secretary for Health as stated in Title 38 U.S.C. 7306, like other Assistant Under Secretaries at the VA. Because there is only one senior executive within VA Dentistry, there is no additional cost to elevating the head of VA Dentistry to a more appropriate level.

The ADA thanks you for your commitment to the oral health of our nation's veterans. As you consider how to fund dentistry at VA in order to meet this commitment, we urge that you provide \$1.25 billion to VA Dentistry, direct that this funding not be used elsewhere within the VA, and provide guidance to the VA that the VA Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Dentistry be at the same executive level as other Assistant Under Secretaries at the VA, reporting directly to the Under Secretary. This funding and resources will both continue to prove your commitment to the oral health of veterans and ensure the continued access to high quality VA dental care.

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Sincerely,

George R. Shepley, D.D.S.
President

Raymond A. Cohlma, D.D.S.
Executive Director

GRS:RAC:cm