

The VA Mission Act: Funding to Fail?

Yesterday on D-Day, the 74th anniversary of the invasion of Normandy, President Trump signed the VA Mission Act. The law directs the VA to combine a number of existing private-care programs, including the so-called Choice program, which was created in 2014 after veterans died waiting for appointments at the Phoenix VA (1). During the signing Trump touted the new law saying “there has never been anything like this in the history of the VA” and saying that veterans “can go right outside [the VA] to a private doctor”-but can they? Although the bill authorizes private care, it appropriates no money to pay for it. Although a bipartisan plan to fund the expansion is proposed in the House, the White House has been lobbying Republicans to vote the plan down (2). Instead Trump has been asking Congress to pay for veteran’s programs by cutting spending elsewhere (2).

We in Arizona are very familiar with what is likely ahead if the VA Mission Act goes unfunded. One example is Arizona Child Protective Services (CPS). After enduring years of funding cuts after the 2007 recession, many CPS employees left and the caseloads of those remaining became unmanageable. In 2013 a scandal erupted when it was uncovered that over 6000 cases of child abuse or neglect were not investigated (3). Many legislators who were responsible for the funding cuts blamed poor management and eventually CPS was reformed as a separate agency.

Arizona schools may be going to the same direction as CPS. After reducing funding to the point that Arizona schools spend less per pupil than any state in the nation, Governor Doug Ducey and many of the Arizona legislators favor charter/private schools (4). However, tax dollars are funneled away from public schools by the expansion of the charter/private school voucher system (4).

The VA may also be getting this “funding to fail” treatment with the VA Mission Act. If confirmed, Veterans Affairs Secretary nominee, Robert Wilkie, would lead the effort to implement the VA Mission Care Act (2). With no funding Wilkie will undoubtedly need to take money from other VA programs leading to their failure. Down the road, he can expect criticism for the failed programs and be fired by a tweet as did the previous Secretary for Veterans Affairs (5).

Un- or under-funded mandates have become a favorite of politicians who take credit for voting for something good but avoid the blame of voting to pay for it. However, at the moment the economy seems sufficiently strong that Congress enacted a \$1.5 trillion tax cut and can fund an expensive border wall. The VA Mission Act can provide the healthcare the VA has been unable to perform but only if accompanied by the \$50 billion funding it requires to be successful.

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References

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