



June 27, 2018

United States Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
412 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Tester, and Committee Members:

As you consider the nomination of Robert Wilkie to serve as Secretary of Veterans Affairs, People For the American Way urges you on behalf of its members to vigorously question Mr. Wilkie to determine his position on expanded privatization of the health care now provided to veterans by the Veterans Administration.

When the White House fired the previous secretary, David Shulkin, he sounded an alarmⁱ about “the ambitions of people who want to put V.A. health care in the hands of the private sector.” Shulkin believes he was removed because he is “convinced that privatization is a political issue aimed at rewarding select people and companies with profits, even if it undermines care for veterans.”

“Working with community providers to adequately ensure that veterans’ needs are met is a good practice,” Shulkin wrote. “But privatization leading to the dismantling of the department’s extensive health care system is a terrible idea.”

As National Public Radio reportedⁱⁱ in May, “Currently the VA is rated to deliver as good or betterⁱⁱⁱ quality care than the private sector in most states.” The ideological push for privatization threatens to undermine momentum and funding for reforms needed to continue to strengthen the VA. As NPR noted:

While the VA has always relied on some help from private doctors, there are concerns that spending on the more expensive private care could put the department into a death-spiral, where it starves its own health budget, resulting in worse care at VA facilities, and leading to more private care spending.

House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi recently noted^{iv} that if confirmed as secretary, Willkie would be responsible for continuing the work of his predecessors in modernizing the VA while facing a major budget shortfall. In the words of Leader Pelosi, “He must unequivocally reject the dark cloud of ideologues that plague this administration and the President’s open embrace of the Koch Brothers-led forces’ efforts to dismantle veterans’ health care.”

We respectfully urge you to use the confirmation hearing to gain clarity on Mr. Wilkie's position before senators are asked to vote on his nomination.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Marge Baker".

Marge Baker
Executive Vice President for Policy and Program

ⁱ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/28/opinion/shulkin-veterans-affairs-privatization.html>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/05/18/612442636/surprise-trump-nominates-acting-va-secretary-robert-wilkie-to-fill-role-permanent>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.rand.org/news/press/2018/04/26.html>

^{iv} <https://www.democraticleader.gov/newsroom/51818-6/>