



July 12, 2023

The Honorable Jon Tester
Chairman
U.S. Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
412 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Jerry Moran
Ranking Member
U.S. Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
412 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Tester and Ranking Member Moran:

On behalf of the undersigned leading organizations that represent the senior living industry, including assisted living owners, operators, and aging services providers, we commend you for holding today's hearing to consider pending legislation, including S. 495, the Expanding Veterans' Options for Long-Term Care Act.

Our veteran population is aging rapidly, as are their long-term care needs. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, roughly half of the 9 million veterans currently enrolled in veterans' health care programs are 65 or older. Over the next decade, the number of veterans aged 75 or older is expected to approach 3 million. The number of veterans aged 85 or older receiving care from VA health services is expected to grow by 535% over the next 20 years.

Federal data shows that someone turning age 65 today has a 70% chance of needing some type of long-term care in their lifetime. The Department of Veterans' Affairs predicts that approximately 80% of veterans will develop the need for long-term services at some point in their lives. However, VA is restricted from covering "room and board fees" at assisted living communities, which precludes veterans from utilizing this long-term care option.

If enacted, S. 495 would authorize VA to carry out a three-year pilot program to assess the effectiveness of providing assisted living services to eligible veterans who do not require nursing home care but cannot live alone. We believe this bill and the pilot program is an economically sound and sensible approach to demonstrate the benefits of assisted living to veterans and their families.

Support is growing for S. 495. In a July 7 hearing entitled "An Abiding Commitment to Those Who Served: Examining Veterans' Access to Long Term Care," members of this committee heard from Ms. Carla Wilton, Chief Operating Officer of Immanuel Lutheran Communities, a full-service retirement community offering independent living, assisted living, memory support, and long-term care to 300 older adults in Kalispell, Montana. In her testimony, Ms. Wilton shared her support for S. 495, telling the committee that "this important legislation would create a

commonsense approach to identifying and securing greater options and opportunities for Montana veterans to access important supportive long term care services.”

At the same hearing, Ms. Whitney Bell, President of the National Association of State Veterans Homes, told the committee that “NASVH is pleased to offer our strongest support for S. 495. On behalf of our member State Homes and the veterans we serve, I want to thank Senators Tester and Moran for introducing this legislation, along with other Senators who have supported it, and call for its swift consideration and approval by the Committee.”

In a June 21 legislative hearing of the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee’s Health Subcommittee, which included H.R. 1815, the House companion to S. 495, Dr. Erica Scavella, Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Clinical Services at the Department of Veterans Affairs, indicated that the VA supports the bill, with some technical amendments.

In her written testimony, Dr. Scavella told the committee “VA agrees that specific authority, particularly in the form of a pilot program, to furnish assisted living services would be a helpful addition to VA’s options for long-term care. VA has encountered difficulties within its current authorities in appropriately placing Veterans who may only require assisted living services because these Veterans do not qualify for nursing home care. Moreover, due to shifts in the industry to an assisted living model of care, particularly for patients with dementia, Alzheimer’s, or other memory deficits, VA’s lack of authority to furnish assisted living services means they have no appropriate option. The pilot authority would allow VA to determine how best to develop a program to support these Veterans’ needs. VA supports the protections this bill would include to ensure that Veterans are protected and receiving safe and appropriate care.

We welcome VA’s support of this important legislation. Also speaking in support of the bill were representatives of the Wounded Warrior Project, the American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, and The Independence Fund.

In a 2021 report to Congress, the VA outlined federal savings that could be achieved if veterans were given the option of assisted living care. Approximately 5 percent of veterans residing in federally funded Community Nursing Homes (CNHs) could be appropriately housed in assisted living. In FY2020 the annual cost of a CNH placement was \$120,701 compared with \$51,600 for assisted living. By utilizing assisted living for individuals who meet the relevant criteria at the time of admission, the VA would realize a potential cost of avoidance of \$69,101 per placement per year.

Long-term care and assisted living communities are home to two million seniors, of which 42% are veterans or their spouses. We believe that assisted living offers the best of personal and supportive care services with a team of professionals in a home environment that promotes social engagement, nutrition, and wellbeing. We are confident that, if passed, S. 495 will demonstrate the benefits of assisted living not only to veterans, but to their families as well, offering additional options to our veterans in their time of need.

By expanding long-term care options for our rapidly aging veteran population, particularly in rural areas, S. 495 will give our veterans more options for how and where they can get the care they need while preserving taxpayer dollars. We thank you and look forward to working with

the committee to advance this legislation and ensure our veterans have access to the best long-term care and services at the time they need it most. They deserve it.

Sincerely,

American Seniors Housing Association (ASHA)
Argentum
Leading Age
National Center for Assisted Living (NCAL)