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by Hope Yen (AP)
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Veterans Affairs considers closing 1,100 medical sites

WASHINGTON — Veterans Affairs Secretary David Shulkin says his department is seeking to close perhaps more than 1,100 VA facilities nationwide as it develops plans to allow more veterans to receive medical care in the private sector.

At a House hearing Wednesday, Shulkin said the VA had identified more than 430 vacant buildings and 735 that he described as underutilized, costing the federal government \$25 million a year. He said the VA would work with Congress in prioritizing buildings for closure and was considering whether to follow a process the Pentagon had used in recent decades to decide which of its underused military bases to shutter, known as Base Realignment and Closure, or BRAC.

“Whether BRAC is a model that we should take a look, we’re beginning that discussion with members of Congress,” Shulkin told a House appropriations subcommittee. “We want to stop supporting our use of maintenance of buildings we don’t need, and we want to reinvest that in buildings we know have capital needs.”

While President Donald Trump’s budget blueprint calls for a 6 percent increase in VA funding, Shulkin has made clear the government’s second-largest agency with nearly 370,000 employees will have to operate more efficiently and that budget increases should not be considered a given in future years. The department recently announced hiring restrictions on roughly 4,000 positions despite the lifting of the federal hiring freeze and also left open the possibility of “near-term” and “long-term workforce reductions.” Shulkin is also putting together a broader proposal by fall to expand the VA’s Choice program of private-sector care.

The Pentagon’s BRAC process often stirred controversy in the past as members of Congress expressed concern about the negative economic impact of shuttering military bases and vigorously opposed closures in their districts.

Rep. Jeff Fortenberry, R-Neb., a vice chair of the appropriations panel, told Shulkin that Congress was looking forward to working with the VA “constructively” on the issue in part by determining how excess VA buildings could be put to good community use, such as for fire-fighting, security or landscape maintenance.

“Don’t ever use the term BRAC because it brings up a lot of bad memories,” Fortenberry cautioned. “You automatically set yourself up for a lot of controversy.”

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