

Legislation: Congress takes up major veterans bills

Amidst the exciting election season, it's easy to forget about the recent accomplishments achieved by lawmakers before they left Washington for the summer. Here's a recap of recent legislation that's gained traction and that promises to help improve the lives of our former service members.

Investing in suicide prevention for female veterans

Recognizing the urgent need to help women access culturally competent care, Rep. Julia Brownley (D-CA) and Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-CA) introduced two companion bills titled the Female Veteran Suicide Prevention Act, H.R. 2915 and S. 2487. Their measures require the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to include metrics on female veterans in the annual evaluations sent to Congress.

With more than 2 million female veterans in the United States—the fastest growing subpopulation of veterans treated by the VA—this need only grows. By gathering this information, the agency can identify which programs are the most effective and have the highest satisfaction rates among female veterans. In other words, the VA can better provide the care, counseling and outreach that these veterans need.

The legislation is part of a broader reform effort pushing the VA to recognize the growing number of female veterans who are trying to access care, a number expected to grow significantly in the near future. The amount of female veterans visiting the VA has nearly doubled since 2000 and women now represent 20 percent of new military recruits.

Assisting women and minorities transitioning to civilian life

In May, the House passed the Improving Transition Programs for All Veterans Act (H.R. 5229), which requires the VA to examine whether the existing Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is meeting the unique needs of specific veterans' groups. Specifically,

the legislation is meant to help female veterans, Native American veterans, veterans from the U.S. territories and veterans with disabilities receive the support they need to transition into civilian life.

While TAP has been successful in helping many veterans make the sometimes difficult transition from military to civilian life, Rep. Mark Takano (D-CA) noted that too many former service members are still being left behind. His bill would help gather information to meet the needs of a greater and more diverse group of veterans as they return home.

In addition, the measure asks the VA, Department of Defense and Department of Labor to recommend changes to TAP that would address barriers and better serve vulnerable veterans in their pursuit of meaningful training and employment following their military service.

Holding those who defraud veterans accountable

The Preventing Crimes Against Veterans Act (H.R. 4676), authored by Reps. Tom Rooney (R-FL) and Ted Deutch (D-FL), unanimously passed the House in April. The bill amends the federal criminal code to declare that those who knowingly engage in any scheme to defraud an individual of their veteran's benefits may be fined and receive up to five years in prison.

While it's illegal under existing law for anyone who's not an approved agent to charge a fee for helping a veteran with a claim or an appeal with the VA, there is no criminal or financial penalty associated with breaking the law. The measure comes after a large number of financial predators have been advertising themselves to the veterans community claiming that they can speed up the claims process with the VA—for a hefty fee.

Improving veterans' programs

This congressional session, more than a dozen lawmakers worked to-



gether with Rep. Brad Wenstrup (R-OH) to create legislation that included more than 30 provisions to improve veterans' programs. The measure, the Veterans Employment, Education and Healthcare Improvement Act (H.R. 3016), was passed by the House in February and ranges from improving maternity care in the VA to streamlining G.I. Bill education benefits.

Among the provisions in the legislation are expanding the Fry scholarship for survivors of service members killed since 9/11 and expanding medical care for new mothers and newborns in the VA health system. The bill also improves claims processing and expands the VA's work-study program for student veterans.

Several veterans advocacy groups have expressed concern with several proposals in the bill, however, including cutting benefits for troops' college-age children and slashing the housing allowance for college-age children of service members by 50 percent.

While these proposals have the potential to improve the quality of life for veterans, NALC recognizes that there will be continued attempts to undercut these efforts by some in Congress. We must remain vigilant against these attacks, continuing to educate members of Congress during the summer recess and when Congress returns to Washington this September. The men and women who have made sacrifices to defend our freedoms deserve no less.