

HVAC Member Day
Tuesday, September 10, 2019
210 HVC (House Visitors Center)
Statement by Congressman James R. Baird

H.R. the “VA Safe Opioid Return Act”

Opening Statement:

Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Roe, Members of the Committee, I want to start by thanking you for the opportunity to come before you today. As a decorated Vietnam War veteran, I care very deeply about this country, and ensuring the veterans of our armed forces are taken care of and have the opportunities and benefits they deserve. The important work that this committee has done in the past, and that it continues to do, is essential in keeping our promise to our men and women in uniform as they transition back into civilian life.

I’m here today to highlight a piece of legislation I have authored called the “VA Safe Opioid Return Act.” This legislation is simple and common sense. My bill directs the Secretary of the Veterans Administration to ensure that certain Department of Veteran’s Affairs medical centers have physical locations for the disposal of controlled substance medications, namely opioids. Any VA medical facility with an on-site pharmacy or a law enforcement officer present to monitor the disposal location, will be charged with having a physical location for veterans to dispose of unwanted or overprescribed medications.

The inspiration for this bill came from the great success seen at the Roudebush VA Hospital in my home state of Indiana. Treating nearly 62,000 Hoosier veterans annually, the Roudebush VA decided to implement an opioid return receptacle in their facility after noticing a low number of participants in their opioid mail back program, and having patients bring their unused medications to the ER or to their appointments.

The Roudebush VA set out to put in a DEA-compliant receptacle for just over \$1,000 dollars and bought 12 safe and secure liners for another \$2,000. Staff from the engineering service installed the receptacle for no cost. Once in place, the receptacle was anchored to the floor, monitored under video surveillance, and placed away from the emergency department entrance (a DEA requirement). Emails were sent to staff to provide education, and descriptive data was collected from the time of implementation.

After opening to the public in May 2016, the Roudebush VA saw a drastic increase in the amount of unused or unwanted medication it was collecting. From May to October of that year, the facility collected 452lb's of medication, and an additional 30lb's of drugs were mailed back through the mail back envelope program. In just this 6-month period, this large amount of medication was safely returned to the reverse distributor or destroyed, ensuring that this potentially addictive medication found its way off the streets and away from the general public. This is why we need this bill.

This model applied across the VA system to all VA medical facilities with pharmacies or on-site law enforcement personnel will go a long way toward getting these medications off the streets. With more than 50% of veterans suffering from chronic pain, and half of those receiving at least one prescription for opioids, it is imperative that we give our veterans an easy, anonymous, and continually available way to dispose of their medications once they no longer need them.

This bill has yet to be introduced but has already garnered large support from both sides of the aisle with over 29 original co-sponsors. I urge the committee to consider this legislation for markup and believe that it can be passed through the House on suspension.

I want to thank you again for the opportunity to come before the committee today to address this important piece of legislation, and I look forward to hearing any questions or feedback that you may have. Thank you.