

Congresswoman Vicky Hartzler
Veterans Affairs Committee – Member Day
September 10, 2019

Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Roe, and distinguished members of the committee, I want to applaud you for once again opening your doors and allowing me the opportunity to address you on Member Day. I also want to commend you for your continued commitment and dedication to improving outcomes for our veterans. I think as a Committee and as a Congress great strides have been made to ensure our veterans have the resources, care, and support they have earned. However, as I examine what more can be done for our veterans, I am convinced that many of the healthcare challenges our veterans face is a result of the persistent understaffing at the VA.

I believe that a bipartisan bill I introduced along with Representatives Correa, Wilson, Mooney, Rouzer, Lesko, and Bost, The *VA Hiring Enhancement Act*, will help the VA to fill some of the 40,000 VA vacancies. Our bill has three main provisions. First, it would allow physicians to be released from non-compete agreements for the purpose of serving in the VA for at least one year. These agreements may serve a purpose in the proper context but should never serve as a roadblock to caring for veterans within the VA system.

Second, our bill updates the minimum training requirements for VA physicians. Completion of a medical residency is widely accepted as standard comprehensive training for clinical physicians in the United States. However, current law only requires that a physician be licensed in order to treat veterans. While in practice, the VA currently hires almost exclusively those physicians which have completed a residency, this provision will update those minimum requirements already established in law and ensure that they are the appropriate ones.

Finally, our bill would place veterans' hospitals on a level playing field with the private sector when it comes to recruiting timelines. Often, private sector health care providers begin recruiting medical residents as they begin their final year of residency, sometimes even earlier. These residents often end up with a solid job offer from the private sector before VA recruiters are even able to get their recruiting process started.

Our bill authorizes VA recruiters to make job offers to physicians up to 2 years prior to fulfilling the VA's requirements, contingent on meeting all requirements before they begin practicing at the VA. It offers job security to medical residents who want to work at the VA when they complete their training and allows VA facilities and recruiters to shore up appointments further in advance, helping them to plan and forecast medical workforce needs.

We've worked closely with this committee's staff, VA recruiters, and VSOs on this bill, and I'm pleased to report that it has garnered wide support and formal endorsement from 10 veterans' service organizations including the American Legion, Blinded Veterans Association, AMVETS, Disabled American Veterans, and Paralyzed Veterans of America. This measure is currently slated to be discussed at an upcoming Health Subcommittee hearing and it's my hope we can work together to move this bill to the House floor soon.

In addition to VA staffing shortages, our veterans are facing another healthcare issue when experiencing a medical emergency. Current law provides for the reimbursement of ambulance transportation and emergency treatment at non-VA hospitals for certain veterans until they are medically stable. However, once stabilized, veterans must be transferred to a VA facility for any continued care they require or pay out-of-pocket for further treatment at the non-VA hospital.

The problem is that federal law does not currently allow for the reimbursement of the transfer for continued care, which often must be accomplished via ambulance that can be too expensive for patients to pay. The average cost for this necessary medical transfer is \$500 but it can be far more expensive if the veteran lives in a rural area.

To address this issue, I partnered with Congressman Joe Cunningham to introduce bipartisan legislation that would fix the shortfall in the VA's statutory authority to reimburse certain veterans for emergency transportation. H.R. 3350, the *VA Emergency Transportation Act* corrects this disparity by clarifying that these medical transfers are reimbursable. This change fixes a large, costly hole in the safety net the original law was intended to provide.

Congressman Cunningham and I are joined by over 40 Members in supporting this critical measure. Additionally, 13 veterans' service organizations, including all of the "Big Six" have voiced strong support for this necessary reform. Far too many of our veterans continue to face this unnecessary burden at their most vulnerable time, creating financial hardships and jeopardizing their health. We must act now to move this bill forward and protect our veterans.

Finally, I would like to highlight one additional measure, H.R. 2433, the *Veterans' Preference Parity Act*. Outdated federal hiring rules prevent too many patriots from being recognized when competing for federal positions. The Veterans' Preference Parity Act rights this wrong by modernizing the archaic federal hiring process and recognizing those who have served our nation.

Up to 44% of the Army National Guard and 70% of the Air National Guard serve honorably without qualifying for federal hiring preference. Additionally, over 130,000 working age retired veterans do not qualify under the current system. The Veterans' Preference Parity Act reforms outdated federal hiring rules to allow all retired service members and a greater number of National Guard and Reservists to qualify for veterans' preference.

We are forever indebted to the brave men and women who serve in uniform and we owe them our continued support as veterans. The current federal hiring preference statutes must be updated to reflect the way we utilize our reserve component forces and need to reward those who retire upon completion of their military career – not punish them. Please join me in reforming these outdated federal hiring rules and support the Veterans' Preference Parity Act today.

Thank you, again, for your time and consideration.

Vicky Hartzler
Member of Congress