

**STATEMENT OF
THE HONORABLE BRIAN MAST
U.S. CONGRESSMAN
BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SEPTEMBER 10, 2019**

Chairman Takano and Ranking Member Roe, I appreciate the opportunity to testify before the House Veterans' Affairs Committee on bipartisan legislation I introduced with 20 cosponsors, H.R. 2846, the *Improving Veterans Access to Congressional Services Act*. This important legislation, which this committee held a hearing on in the previous Congress—and which was scheduled to be marked up—will ensure that our veterans receive the high level of constituent service they deserve by improving access to their congressional representatives.

Like all members serving on this committee, I take great pride in serving the veterans in my community and want them to know that their service and sacrifice is truly appreciated. That means being readily available to deal with, and quickly dispose of, any delay in the care or benefits they've earned. It also means being present in VA facilities to see first-hand the issues that exist, so that I can truly understand the challenges our veterans face. That's why I still do, and always will, get my healthcare from the Department of Veterans Affairs. Not only will I experience the issues and problems first hand, but I will also get the opportunity to see what is working well.

That's also why I, along with a bipartisan congressional delegation from my area, fought so hard—overcoming more than a year of red tape and federal bureaucracy—to open the first-ever congressional office inside a VA facility last year. Doing so allowed me to expedite the assistance I provide our veterans and improve the overall quality of service my office delivers. We get to interact with our vets on a regular basis and receive both positive and negative feedback on the operations of the facility. When common threads or issues surface, I can take them to the administration, and we can work collaboratively to resolve them.

Additionally, when veterans have a negative personal experience at our VA facility, they know they can air their concerns or grievances at the highest possible level, without having to go out of the way to another office. It's another level of customer service that wouldn't otherwise exist without the presence of our congressional office.

My staff and I have held more than 500 meetings with veterans in this office since it opened, and that doesn't include the many meetings taken by Representatives Deutch, Hastings and Frankel.

Since I opened our office in the VA, I've been approached by several other members looking to replicate our efforts. In each instance, the feedback they received was pushback and hesitancy at their local VA. That's why I introduced the *Improving Veterans Access to Congressional Services Act*, which requires the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to permit the use of VA facilities by Members of Congress for the purposes of meeting with constituents. Additionally, this bill requires the Secretary to establish standard operating procedures to help facilitate and expedite requests for space within a VA facility by Members of Congress. By building on the lessons learned establishing the first VA Congressional office and removing the road-blocks I experienced, Members of Congress will be able to provide the high level of constituent services our veterans deserve.

I truly believe that every Member of Congress should have this opportunity to open an office at their local VA, and Members of Congress should not have to face the bureaucracy and delays I experienced in opening my office in the West Palm Beach VA Medical Center.

The more present Members of Congress are, the better quality of service our veterans receive. Not only will it help veterans in their communities, but it will afford those members an opportunity to be present for the successes and failures and to see first-hand how Congress can reform the VA. By building off the process established by the Veterans Administration when I opened my office, we can improve our vets' access to Congressional services as well as their overall care.

Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Roe and members of the committee, I appreciate the opportunity to testify on my legislation and I look forward to your questions.