

## **Rep. Brad Wenstrup – Member Day Testimony**

Chairman Takano and Ranking Member Roe,

I would like to thank you for holding this Member Day hearing. Caring for our veterans is one of Congress's most sacred duties, and I was extremely proud to spend the first five years of my time in Congress serving our nation's veterans on this distinguished committee. While I may no longer serve on this committee, I will never stop serving America's veterans, and that is what brings me here today.

I am extremely proud of the work that Congress, and particularly this committee, has done to ensure better healthcare for our veterans. Last year, we passed the VA MISSION Act to create a healthcare system that truly puts veterans first by giving them more choice in their healthcare treatments. The health of our veterans is one of my highest priorities, and today I am here to advocate for another bill which will improve veterans' healthcare.

Rep. Kathleen Rice and I have introduced H.R. 3700, which will prohibit smoking in all Veterans Health Administration (VHA) facilities, and repeal the antiquated 1992 law that requires the VHA to furnish and maintain designated indoor or outdoor smoking areas. As an Army Reserve doctor, I know that permitting or exposing patients to firsthand and secondhand smoke is dangerous, especially while they undergo treatment at VHA facilities. It's past time that Congress address this issue that it created in 1992 and fix the outdated law so that we do not continue to harm veterans seeking care at VHA facilities.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), smoking is the leading cause of preventable death in the United States—killing more than 480,000 people annually—and there is no risk-free level of exposure to secondhand smoke. As such, the overwhelming majority of America's private health care systems and facilities, most Department of Defense medical facilities, and all federal government buildings, are smoke-free. Yet there are nearly 1,000 designated indoor or outdoor smoking spaces at VHA facilities across the country—at least one in every state. In addition to the health concerns, such spaces are difficult to maintain and cost the VA more than \$1.2 million annually.

That's why I was pleased to see VA Secretary Robert Wilkie announce this June that beginning in October, all VHA facilities will be smoke-free. However, it's since come to my attention that this policy change has been challenged by the American Federation of Government Employees, who argue that the smoke-free policy should not apply to VA employees. I believe that this is a perfect illustration of precisely why Congress needs to assert its authority and make clear once and for all that smoking is unacceptable in the medical facilities where our veterans seek care every day. H.R. 3700 would do exactly that, ensuring that no one can change, reinterpret, or strike down the smoke-free policy.

The VA strongly supports codifying the smoke-free policy, as do over two dozen public health organizations such as the American Cancer Society Action Network, the American Lung Association, the American Heart Association, the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, and the

Society of Thoracic Surgeons. I would also like to thank the members of this committee who have cosponsored H.R. 3700, Reps. Greg Steube and Chris Pappas, for their support of this bill.

Chairman Takano and Health Subcommittee Chairwoman Brownley, I urge you to consider H.R. 3700 at a future Health Subcommittee legislative hearing. This is important legislation which will build on this committee's work to improve veterans' healthcare, and I thank you for your consideration. With that I yield back the balance of my time.