

## The Honorable Gus M. Bilirakis' Testimony

Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Bost, distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for holding this Bipartisan Member Day Hearing – it is an honor to speak before the Committee this morning. For most of my Congressional career, I have sat on the other side of that dais participating as a Member of this Committee, and I often found myself in awe of the sacrifices and efforts that have been made on behalf of our great country by the men and women who have worn the uniform of our Armed Services. Providing the care these Veterans deserve is still one of my top priorities, and even though I am not a member of the Committee this Congress, I will continue to stand alongside the great work you are doing.

One of my longstanding commitments towards our nation's Veterans has been to rectify the unfair offset between military retired pay and VA disability compensation, known as concurrent receipt. Congress has implemented concurrent receipt payments for some Veterans since 2004, a policy championed by my father, Rep. Mike Bilirakis, but has yet to provide it equally for every disabled Veteran primarily due to cost. Despite spending trillions of dollars on yearly budgets, we never manage to have the funding necessary to make these Veterans whole. I have two pieces of legislation that address the concurrent receipt problem, H.R. 303, the Retired Pay Restoration Act, and H.R. 1282, the Major Richard Star Act. I especially want to thank my friend and colleague Dr. Ruiz for his support in co-leading the Major Richard Star Act, which focuses concurrent receipt on Chapter 61 combat-wounded Veterans. I urge the rest of the members of this Committee to support this effort.

Another top priority of mine is providing access to care and benefits for Veterans who have been exposed to toxic burn pits. I have been glad to have introduced and supported multiple bills in this space in past Congresses, and this year I am proud to be an original co-lead on H.R. 2127, the TEAM Act, which comprehensively addresses toxic exposures now and in the future. I want to thank Ranking Member Bost for his commitment to the TEAM Act, and I urge the Chairman to reach an agreement with the House and Senate on this issue – our Veterans cannot afford to wait any longer for the medical treatment and benefits they deserve.

I have also had significant feedback from my district's Veteran constituents expressing their desire to add dental care to the VA's medical benefits package. Studies have shown that regular preventive dental care equates to lower healthcare costs and better outcomes. For these reasons I will soon file the VET CARE Act, which would expand on this research to determine the potential health benefits to Veterans with diabetes and the potential cost savings to the VA associated with periodontal care, all through a 4-year pilot program. I was grateful that the Committee unanimously reported the VET CARE Act out of Full Committee Markup last Congress, and I hope the Chair will commit to doing so again this year.

Lastly, I had the distinct pleasure in the past Congress to serve as Ranking Member of the Economic Opportunity Subcommittee and am proud of the work we were able to do with my friend and Subcommittee Chairman, Mike Levin. This Congress, I remain committed to improving the livelihoods of our student Veterans and will be filing legislation to provide full parity of Basic Allowance for Housing monthly stipends for post-9/11 GI Bill Veterans who take their classes solely online. The irony is not lost on me as we sit here in this virtual online hearing and have done so throughout the COVID pandemic. Most students have also had to do this, and yet those Veterans who had embraced online only classes prior to the pandemic, were only able to access 50% of their housing stipend. I want to rectify this

imbalance of benefits, and hope that the Committee will join me and find a way to provide equitable treatment to these student Veterans.

I would like to thank the Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Committee again for inviting me to testify today.