

Rep. Brad Wenstrup – Member Day Testimony for the Record

Chairman Bost and Ranking Member Takano,

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. Today, I am here to advocate for two pieces of legislation which I believe will improve the care and benefits that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) provides to veterans.

Rep. Lauren Underwood and I have introduced H.R. 2398, 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. Fortunately, former Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert Wilkie implemented a VHA Smoke Free policy in 2019 which prohibits smoking by patients, visitors, volunteers, contractors, vendors and employees while on VA property. However, I believe it is important that we codify this policy to prevent any challenge that could overturn this policy.

Notably, a union representing VA employees has filed a grievance against the smoke free policy and was successful in challenging the policy as a violation of VA's collective bargaining agreement with the union. While this has not resulted in changes to the policy itself, it illustrates that the directive implementing Smoke Free VA could be vulnerable to legal challenges. 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. I hope that the committee will consider this bill at a future Health subcommittee legislative hearing.

Next, I wish to highlight my bill, H.R. 3738, the Veterans' Education, Transition, and Opportunity Prioritization Plan (VET OPP) Act of 2023. Far too often, people think that veterans return from war defeated and with skills that are not applicable to the civilian world. This "broken veteran narrative" could not be further from the truth. Our veterans are strong, dependable leaders, and our commitment to programs that promote opportunity and success reinforces their ability.

I believe our servicemembers should have a plan from the day they enter the military to the day they transition out and beyond. Our veterans are soldiers for life, and we need to put as much emphasis and attention on their success after service as we do during it.

Currently, the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) is responsible for all VA benefits provided to veterans outside of healthcare and cemetery services. While there are many different benefits that VBA provides, the bulk of staffing and resources have been, understandably, directed towards the administration of disability compensation and pension claims. This has resulted in a lack of attention on the administration of other VBA benefits, such as the Forever GI Bill, Vocational Rehabilitation, Home Loan benefits, and VA's portion of the Transition Assistance Program. We cannot let these benefits fall by the wayside, especially those that empower veterans and help set them on the path to a successful civilian life.

By aligning transition, education, and employment programs in a Fourth Administration within the VA, the VET OPP Act will modernize the department and ensure that these opportunity-focused programs get the high priority they deserve, and the oversight they need to better serve veterans.

I want to thank Representative Levin, the Ranking Member of the Economic Opportunity Subcommittee, for leading this bill with me for the third successive Congress. I hope that the Committee will pass this bill as it has done each of the previous two Congresses, and that the full House will lend its support as well.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to testify.