

Testimony of Rep. Jack Bergman (MI-01)
House Veterans Affairs Committee
June 22, 2023

Thank you, Mr. Chairman

As a member of this committee, I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss two of the most pressing issues facing Veterans and the committee today.

First, private assistance in Veteran disability applications and VA accreditation reform.

Earlier this year, I introduced the PLUS for Veterans Act – H.R. 1822 – along with Lou Correa of California and my fellow committee member, Nancy Mace of South Carolina. This bipartisan bill will reimplement penalties for unaccredited agents, modernize the VA accreditation system, and protect the right for Veterans to seek help from the private market when filing for their disability benefits.

As a representative of the VFW stated before the Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs subcommittee on March 29th of this year, quote: “if a company is able to be accredited, or their individuals are able to be accredited, then they are part of the VA oversight, and the VFW would support that.” The PLUS Act seeks to accomplish just this – incorporating businesses into VA accreditation so that Veterans can be protected and bad actors can be punished.

I’m encouraged to hear of the ongoing negotiations among Members of the Senate VA committee to build off the PLUS Act and draft their own version. I’ve received constructive input from Veterans, businesses, stakeholders, and certain VSOs that are looking to create the best solution possible for those who served, and not just engage in political grandstanding.

However, several points of possible disagreement remain that I feel compelled to speak on.

First, any imposed caps on fees that an accredited agent may charge must be set at a level designed to protect Veterans from abuse – not at a level that effectively sets the price for the entire market. Veterans should be allowed to choose whatever option they decide to be in their best interest – filing on their own, going through a VSO, or through a private business – draconian fee caps will only limit the number of choices available to them.

Secondly, any solution we consider must avoid creating barriers to entry for companies wishing to assist Veterans – both those currently operating in the space, as well as new businesses that may come along with innovative ideas to improve outcomes for our Veterans. This is especially relevant when discussing the effective date of legislation and how long it takes VA to approve new accreditation applications. Congress must make sure the VA does its job for Veterans and those who want to assist them by improving the accreditation application process and establishing a system for provisional accreditation.

Finally, I am concerned of the level of hostility the VA has shown towards private businesses – many of them Veteran-owned – that have a long history of successful outcomes and grateful Veterans that have chosen to seek out their services. My office has recently been made aware of Veterans who have been harassed and questioned by federal agents simply for choosing to receive assistance from a private business. While we must identify and punish those entities who try to take advantage of Veterans, we cannot tolerate persecution of businesses that are doing the right things for our Veterans. Any accreditation reform bill must include measures that would stop a potentially hostile and weaponized VA from going around Congressional intent to limit Veteran choice and access to private assistance.

I look forward continuing our work in committee to advance effective accreditation reform that protects Veterans and their rights.

The second issue is access to psychedelic-assisted therapies.

These breakthrough treatments offer an extremely promising opportunity to address the ongoing suicide and mental health epidemic among service members and Veterans, with thousands of success stories so far in treating PTSD, depression, and addiction. Last year I cofounded the Psychedelics Advancing Therapies, or PATH, caucus with my friend, Congressman Lou Correa, with the goal of improving understanding and knowledge of these therapies among Members of Congress and their staffs.

Yesterday I had the opportunity to support Congressman Luttrell's amendment to establish a DoD study on psychedelic therapies as part of the NDAA in the Armed Services Committee. Today, I am calling for the VA and the House VA Committee to do their part.

I'm glad that the committee has begun to place a greater focus on these breakthrough therapies, including through the recent Health subcommittee roundtable. I'm also grateful to Chairman Bost for attending the recent PATH Caucus briefing where we heard several Navy Seals share their positive experiences with psychedelics. The House VA committee must now focus on furthering VA research into psychedelics, training mental health professionals in the VA system to utilize these therapies, and ensure Veterans have access to them once they receive FDA approval. Those who risked their lives in defense of our country deserve positive and fulfilling lives, and the federal government has the responsibility to assist them in their endeavor.

Again, I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on these issues today, and I look forward to continuing our work in the House VA committee to get the best possible outcomes for all Veterans.