

H.R. 5686 - Physician Volunteer Ambassadors Helping Veterans
Statement of Congressman John Culberson (TX-07)

I recently had a chance to speak with a top physician from MD Anderson in Houston, who was frustrated that she and her talented colleagues had been rebuffed several times when offering to volunteer their time and expertise at VA hospitals. As Chairman of the Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations Subcommittee I find it incredibly troubling that at a time when veterans are forced to go outside of the VA health care system because of waiting lists and staffing shortages or wait months for an appointment, a physician from one of the best hospitals in America is told by VA that they do not want her free help. Together Dr. Beth Edeiken-Monroe and I decided that Congress should cut through the bureaucracy holding up the volunteer process for qualified physicians at VA facilities.

After looking into it, I found that Congress already told VA to accept volunteers in its facilities—over two decades ago; it just rarely chooses to use this authority. It seems that VA needs more guidance as to when Congress expects it to use this valuable resource — so I crafted legislation that does just that. I spelled out that when volunteers are available and willing to help in facilities that are strained by appointment waiting times or staffing shortages, VA should make every effort to accept their assistance in a prompt manner.

By accepting the help of more volunteer physicians within VA hospitals, we will be able to keep more veterans within the VA health care system while alleviating some of the pressure on strained facilities. This would allow VA to continue its management over the quality, consistency, and specificity of more veterans' care. While this bill is not intended to solve long-term staffing problems, it could be a step in helping more veterans gain prompt access to reliable and high quality care within their local VA.

Through the existing privilege granting process these volunteer doctors are covered from medical malpractice liability just as any other physician within the VA or Health and Human Services systems is covered. I also wanted to be sure that VA received a substantial benefit for its effort in granting privileges to these doctors so I included a 40 hour minimum volunteer service hours per year requirement. We have received an outpouring of support from doctors who are excited about this bill and want to volunteer their time with the VA.

I'm thankful for the opportunity to hear about this issue from Dr. Edeiken in Houston. This simple idea could potentially help hundreds of our veterans get quick access to high quality and reliable health care.

For generations, veterans have shown untold courage and sacrifice to ensure that our American way of life can continue long into the future. The men and women who have served our country are truly American heroes, and it's not surprising that people around the country want to help the VA serve our veterans. This is a simple, cost effective, community building resource that we should be using to help veterans quickly access the high-quality and reliable health care within the VA system that they have earned.