

Rep. Walberg Testimony for Medal of Honor Priority Care Act (H.R.272)

Chairman Benishek, Ranking Member Brownley and Members of the Subcommittee, I thank you for allowing me the time to speak this morning in support of my legislation, H.R.272, the Medal of Honor Priority Care Act of 2015.

As the Members of this Committee are well aware, the Congressional Medal of Honor is the highest award for valor which can be bestowed upon an individual serving in the United States Armed Forces and is awarded to soldiers who have displayed conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of life above and beyond the call of duty. The Medal of Honor is a distinguished award given to a select few. Less than 3,500 have been awarded, 16 awards have gone to soldiers who fought in the recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Currently there are only 79 living Medal of Honor recipients.

My state of Michigan is privileged to have two living recipients, Corporal Duane E. Dewey and Private First Class Robert E. Simanek. Both received the decoration for their heroic action in the Korean War, and hearing of their harrowing stories of bravery has reminded me of the sacrifice American soldiers are willing to make to protect their comrades and their country.

Medal of Honor recipients deserve our utmost appreciation, and I believe the small portion of our servicemembers who have gone above and beyond the call of duty and earned the highest honor in our nation's Armed Forces have earned the right to be placed in the top priority group to receive their health care benefits. I'd be remiss if I did not mention the idea for this legislation came from a veteran who lives in my district and works with the veteran community.

All veterans deserve access to the health care they have earned, but as you all know, the VA uses a priority system to determine eligibility for these health care services. Some of the factors that will affect a soldier's priority group ranking are whether the soldier has a service-connected disability, whether they were a former prisoner of war, the time and place of service, as well as income level. Currently, Medal of Honor recipients are in Priority Group 3.

This bill is very similar to legislation approved by this committee during the 113th Congress, which was supported by the VFW, Vietnam Veterans of America, IAVA, the American Legion, and AMVETS. I'm proud to once again have the support of my colleagues from both sides of the aisle on this bill.

I thank the Chair for permitting me to appear before the Subcommittee today.