

Congressman Brad Wenstrup
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs - Subcommittee on Health
Legislative Hearing "H.R.3016, VA Provider Equity Act"
Testimony
July 14, 2015

Good morning Chairman Benishek, Ranking Member Brownley, and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak on the VA Provider Equity Act, H.R. 3016.

This bipartisan legislation, which is currently cosponsored by every doctor on the VA committee and the ranking member of this subcommittee, would increase access to care for our veterans by changing outdated standards to move VA podiatrists to the same fee schedule as doctors of medicine and osteopathy within the VA.

After years of war, we have a new generation of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans returning with lower extremity injuries inflicted by the rise of IEDs on the battlefield. These needs, along with the diabetes-related complications often linked to Agent Orange exposure, require ongoing care from the Veterans Health Administration that podiatrists are uniquely trained to provide.

The need is dramatic: the Department of Veterans Affairs treats more than 45,000 veterans who have lost limbs, and 1.8 million more veterans within the VA are at risk of amputation.

But the wait times remain unacceptable.

For those veterans seeking podiatric care within the VA, 93 percent of new VA podiatry patients wait more than 15 days for an appointment. More than two-thirds of them wait more than 30 days.

These wait times exist because the VA is struggling to recruit and retain experienced podiatrists. 42 percent of VA podiatrists leave the VA system within five years of being hired, and every time a podiatrist leaves, the average time to fill a vacant podiatry position is one year.

The problem, a self-imposed one, is that the VA is not competitive with the private sector when it comes to hiring and retaining podiatrists. While the maximum salary for a VA podiatrist is \$132,000, the average salary for podiatrists in the profession is \$183,269, according to a 2013 APMA survey. That's a \$50,000 difference between the industry average and the maximum that our VA podiatrists can make.

It's no wonder that many of our veterans are losing their VA podiatrists to the private sector.

The VA Provider Equity Act would place podiatrists on the same fee schedule as doctors of medicine and osteopathy within the VA. Since the VA first established podiatric pay standards in 1976, podiatric education, training, and practice have increased exponentially. Medicare recognized these changes over twenty years ago, and implemented fee schedule reform in 1991. It's time for the VA to do the same. Additionally, H.R. 3016 would make podiatrists eligible for the same promotions and leadership positions within hospital systems that they often currently hold in the private sector.

I thank the Chairman and Ranking Member for their support and commitment to increasing access to healthcare for our nation's veterans. I ask for the support of my colleagues in advancing this important legislation. Let's ensure that access to podiatric care is included in the comprehensive, first class health care that all veterans deserve.

Thank you.