

Statement by Rep. John Kline (R-MN)
Chairman, Education and the Workforce Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Health Subcommittee Legislative Hearing
November 17, 2015

Chairman Benishek, Ranking Member Brownley, and members of the Health Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify this morning in support of H.R. 3549, the *VA Billing Accountability Act*, my legislation that will keep faith with our veterans by protecting them from flawed billing practices at the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Mr. Chairman, last week, we, as a nation, paused on Veterans Day to honor those men and women who bravely wore our country's uniform. One of the reasons I first came to Congress was to ensure promises made to our veterans, troops, and their families were promises kept. While Washington has made some strides to do more to keep those promises, we can always do better.

Mr. Chairman, this summer I was notified the VA discovered unbilled co-pay amounts for inpatient care provided to Minnesota and Wisconsin veterans over a five-year period. Most concerning, our veterans were going to be immediately assessed co-pays after the VA erred in not charging veterans at the time of care. To be clear: through no fault of their own, Minnesota and Wisconsin veterans were set to receive on their monthly statements unexpected charges for thousands of dollars for care received, in some cases, several years ago.

Many of our veterans live on fixed incomes or may not have the resources available to cover the unexpected costs caused by the VA's erroneous and untimely billing procedures. These billing blunders can unnecessarily cause confusion, frustration, and stress for many of the veterans in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and across the nation who seek care at the VA.

We owe a great deal to those who have proudly served our nation. They should never be suddenly saddled with bills years later due to the VA's inability to properly track, record, and bill for services.

That is why I am urging members to support my eight-page bill, the *VA Billing Accountability Act*, which keeps our promise of a fair billing process to veterans by giving the Secretary of Veterans Affairs the authority to waive a required co-payment if the VA erred in not sending the bill in a timely manner – timely being within 120 days.

The bill also requires the VA to inform veterans of their rights to payment plans and waivers if the VA does not meet billing timelines based on how and where a veteran received care. If a veteran received care at a VA facility, the VA has up to 120 days to send a bill. If the care is at a non-VA community facility, where the VA must sometimes wait for a final bill to be completed beyond inpatient care times, the VA has up to 18 months to send a bill. The legislation's billing standards are modeled on VA's own stated timelines. If the VA fails to meet their standard timelines shared with me in a letter, the VA must notify the veteran of how to get a waiver and establish a payment plan before they can collect a payment. To be clear, nothing in this section stops the VA from billing a veteran after they inform the veteran of their rights.

I want to thank my colleagues for their support, including bipartisan cosponsors from Minnesota: Collin Peterson, Erik Paulsen, Tom Emmer, and VA Committee member Tim Walz, along with Health Subcommittee member Phil Roe of Tennessee. We worked hard to make this bipartisan legislation, and I also am grateful to Senator Amy Klobuchar for her leadership on this bill in the Senate.

Mr. Chairman, the federal government is expected to keep the public's trust and meet our commitments – especially to those who have sacrificed for our nation. We must work tirelessly to change the culture of bungled bureaucracy and mismanagement at the VA, and restore faith that our veterans will receive the health care they deserve.

I urge members of the committee to support the *VA Billing Accountability Act* to ensure a promise made is a promise kept. Thank you, and I am happy to answer your questions.