

**STATEMENT OF  
THE HONORABLE JENNIFFER GONZALEZ-COLON (PR-AT LARGE)  
BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH LEGISLATIVE HEARING  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**Wednesday, June 3, 2018. 3:00 pm.**

Chairman Neal Dunn, Ranking Member Julia Brownley, thank you for this afternoon's legislative hearing and thank you for including H.R. 5938, the *Veterans Serving Veterans Act* as part of the agenda. I would also like to thank the panel for their testimony.

Mr. Chairman, as previously stated on several occasions before this Committee, the Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) suffers chronic staffing challenges that at times complicate the delivery of proper and timely care. These challenges are often exacerbated by a complex and time-consuming hiring process that extends the time in between the need for a position, and filling it with appropriate staff members. VA facilities within my district are no exception. As a matter of fact, this issue never fails to come up during meetings with veterans in Puerto Rico. Therefore, as an effort to identify a remedial option, the *Veterans Serving Veterans Act* seeks to amend section 208 of the *Choice and Quality Employment Act of 2017* to include Military Occupational Specialties (MOS) that correspond to vacant positions at the VA in the recruiting database, as well as service member's contact information, date of discharge, and the MOS they have acquired.

Employment after separating from the military is beneficial for veterans from a psychological and financial perspective. A process for identifying separating service members with military occupational specialties that match VA position needs and matching them with open positions will be valuable for both the service member and the VA. Therefore, H.R. 5938 will require VA to:

- Coordinate with DOD to identify soon to be separated service members with military occupational specialties needed by VA and to obtain their military specialties, date of separation, and contact information.
- Maintain a database searchable by VA personnel for purposes of hiring soon to be separated service members; and,
- Implement direct hiring and appointment procedures for vacant positions listed in the database for service members who apply for these positions.

Lastly, Section 3 of H.R. 5938 is designed to assist our veterans by requiring VA to implement a program to train and certify former Department of Defense healthcare technicians as Intermediate Care Technicians (ICTs), and to address the large demand for healthcare providers at the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). Currently, these very skilled technicians, trained at significant taxpayer expense, have difficulty gaining employment in their field of specialization after separation from the Armed Forces due to lack of a certification. At the same time, VHA has a significant shortage of providers.

VHA instituted the Intermediate Care Technician Pilot Program in 2013 to train and utilize ICTs at VA facilities in a variety of roles. In March 2015, the program was expanded and has since then received remarkable satisfaction rates and helped fill a void of medical providers within VA medical centers. As of April 2017, **25** VA Medical Centers are utilizing ICTs, are in the process of hiring ICTs, or have indicated the intent to hire ICTs. **34** ICTs have been hired since the end of the pilot.

Despite the high success rate of the program, it is currently operating in a case by case basis, contingent on availability of funds at individual medical centers, and with a limited number of training centers. Implementing a program to train and certify eligible veterans to work as ICTs will provide for continued program support and expansion, ensure rigor in curriculum development, competency assessment, and program monitoring, and allow the pool of eligible ICTs to continue growing to meet veterans' healthcare needs.

Mr. Chairman, it is important to keep in mind that service members are a remarkable asset upon transitioning from military service. The Department of Defense invests millions of dollars in their training, and they develop skills that have proven valuable to the Department of Veterans' Affairs. This bill seeks to further close the gap between transitioning members and the VA by helping them occupy positions currently in demand at the Department and provides an opportunity for greater access to medical care. Moreover, it allows for veterans to be cared by fellow veterans in ways that are most needed by the VA at this moment.

Again, thank you for including it in today's agenda. I look forward to receiving feedback from our panel and fellow colleagues on ways to move forward with this bill.

Thank you.