

**STATEMENT OF  
THE HONORABLE BRIAN MAST  
U.S. CONGRESSMAN  
18<sup>TH</sup> DISTRICT OF FLORIDA  
BEFORE THE  
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH  
SEPTEMBER 13, 2018**

Chairman Roe and Ranking Member Walz, I appreciate the opportunity to testify before the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Health on legislation I introduced in March 2018—HR 5413, the *Improving Veterans Access to Congressional Services Act*.

My commitment every day is to prioritize fixing the issues our veterans face, no matter my station. However, I firmly believe that in order to fix an issue, we must be present to understand the problem. That is why I still do, and always will, get my healthcare from the Department of Veterans Affairs. I experience the issues and problems first hand, but I also get the opportunity to see what is working well.

That is also why, as many of you may know, we opened the first-ever congressional office inside the West Palm Beach VA Medical Center last year. By opening up this office, my staff and I get to see, week in and week out, the daily operations of our local VA. We interact with our veterans daily and receive positive and negative feedback on the operations of the facility in real-time. When common threads or issues surface, I address it with the hospital administration and we work collaboratively to resolve them. Additionally, when veterans have a negative personal experience at our VA facility, they know they can be heard at the highest possible level – immediately.

To provide a bit of background and context, our office in the VA opened for the first time on December 18, 2017. I share this office with three other members of the Florida Congressional Delegation: Representatives Alcee Hastings, Lois Frankel, and Ted Deutch. I try to personally be in the office on Mondays before I fly back here to Washington. In just 9 short months, my office has held over 400 meetings there with our veterans and their families and caregivers and opened nearly 200 additional cases. This office has allowed me to expedite the assistance I provide our veterans and improve the overall quality of service my office delivers.

I truly believe that every Member of Congress should have the opportunity to open an office at their local VA. The more present Members of Congress are, the better quality of service our veterans will receive. Since I opened our office in the VA, I've been approached by several other members looking to replicate our efforts. It took me eight months of administrative processing from the date Secretary Shulkin gave me his commitment until the office actually opened. I was happy to be the first through this door and lessons learned about the process of opening a Congressional VA office should be simplified and institutionalized.

That is why I introduced the *Improving Veterans Access to Congressional Services Act*, to pave the way for our colleagues to open VA offices of their own. Together, we can improve our veterans' access to us and make a high level of service a reality across the country. This legislation requires the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to permit the use of VA facilities by

Members of Congress for the purposes of meeting with their veteran constituents. Additionally, H.R.5413 requires the Secretary to establish standard operating procedures to facilitate and expedite requests for space within a VA facility by Members of Congress.

By building off the process established by the Veterans Administration when I opened my office, we can improve our veterans' access to Congressional services, as well as their overall care. Chairman Roe, Ranking Member Walz and members of the committee, I appreciate the opportunity to testify on my legislation.