

**Testimony of
The Honorable Glenn ‘GT’ Thompson
Member of Congress
Representing Pennsylvania’s Fifth Congressional District
Before the
Committee on Veterans’ Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives
October 24, 2017**

Chairman Roe and Ranking Member Walz, thank you for inviting me to testify before the House Veterans Affairs Committee with regard to H.R. 2123, the Veterans E-Health and Telemedicine Support Act, also known as The VETS Act.

The issues before this committee are critically important to ensure that those who selflessly served our nation receive the care and support they rightfully deserve.

With this in mind, a constituent approached me a few years ago to discuss the barriers to care that his fellow Veterans were experiencing through the VA system.

As an active-duty soldier, he told me stories of his friends coming home from deployments and falling through the cracks in our system. Some were suffering from PTSD, TBI and depression, and required the care of specialists. Others had difficulty traveling from their rural communities to VA Medical Centers because of injuries sustained during combat.

It broke my heart to hear the stories of this soldier’s friends not receiving the care they deserve. What made it more difficult was the fact that this soldier is my son.

After numerous conversations about how we can help our service members when they return home, we determined that expanding access to telehealth would be a great start.

Many of our Veterans live in rural areas or are unable to travel far distances. Allowing them to see their health care provider in the comfort of their home would increase their access to care.

As a result, I introduced the Service members Telemedicine and E-Health Portability Act of 2011, or The STEP Act. This bill allowed Department of Defense healthcare professionals and contractors to provide telehealth care to members of our Armed Forces anywhere in the country, even across state lines. This bill was included in the Fiscal Year 2012 NDAA, which was subsequently signed into law.

The STEP Act has allowed more than 32,000 servicemen and women to gain access to telehealth and has been the basis for a number of telehealth expansions throughout the years. The DoD

recently decided to expand telehealth care for recipients of TRICARE based on the successes of the bill.

The STEP Act has proven that telemedicine can be expanded safely and responsibly across state lines. While DoD patients can receive telehealth care no matter where they are located, those who receive care through the VA are not afforded the same liberties.

This is why Rep. Julia Brownley and I introduced H.R. 2123, The Veterans E-Health and Telemedicine Support Act.

The VETS Act will similarly allow VA-employed health care providers to practice telehealth across state lines, no matter where the doctor or patient is located.

It also commissions a study of the effectiveness of telemedicine programs utilized by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

While the VA has made major strides in advancing telehealth access, outdated barriers limit its growth. My bill will eliminate these barriers by giving VA-employed providers an exemption to practice telehealth across state lines.

Currently, each state has its own licensing requirements for health care providers to practice medicine within its borders. For example, if a doctor has offices in Pennsylvania and Ohio, they must hold a license from each state.

VA-provider licensing requirements are different. As long as a doctor is licensed and in good standing in a single state, they can practice in-person care within the VA system in any state.

This reciprocity, however, is not afforded to their practice of telehealth. VA providers seeking to provide telehealth care to patients must also be licensed in the state where the patient is located.

While this licensing requirement can be waived if both the doctor and patient are located in a federal facility, such as a VA Medical Center, this still forces a Veteran to travel to a VA facility and applies a separate, unnecessary level of regulation to VA telehealth providers.

These outdated regulations are hurting our nation's Veterans.

The Department of Veterans Affairs has successfully been using telemedicine for quite some time. Since 2002, more than two million Veterans have received telehealth care through the VA. In 2016 alone, more than 12 percent of Veterans receiving VA care utilized telehealth in some capacity. 45 percent of these Veterans live in rural areas.

Veterans who have accessed telehealth are overwhelmingly pleased with the quality of care and access they have received. Those receiving at-home care, for example, cite an 88 percent satisfaction rate.

The VETS Act continues to expand telehealth access for Veterans in a responsible manner. It allows states to hold providers accountable while increasing access to quality care for Veterans who need it. The VETS Act is the result of legislators, practitioners and advocates coming together to negotiate workable language in good faith, and these efforts will result in Veterans across the country gaining access to quality care in the comfort of their homes.

Our Veterans should receive the best care available to them, and this starts with the passage of The VETS Act.

Thank you, again, Chairman Roe and Ranking Member Walz for inviting me to testify before the Committee. I look forward to working with you to expand access to quality care for our Veterans.

I yield back the balance of my time.