

**Opening Statement of the Honorable Brad Wenstrup DPM
Chairman, Subcommittee on Health
Committee on Veterans' Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives
Legislative Hearing**

***“Legislative Hearing on: Draft legislation, the Veterans Affairs Medical Scribe Pilot Act of 2017;
H.R. 91; H.R. 95; H.R. 467; H.R. 907; H.R. 918; H.R. 1005; H.R. 1162; H.R. 1545, and,
H.R. 1662”***

**Wednesday, March 29, 2017, at 8:00 a.m.
334 Cannon House Office Building**

Good morning and thank you all for joining us so early this morning for today's Subcommittee on Health legislative hearing.

This morning, we will discuss ten bills that would address a number of issues impacting America's veterans and the health care services they receive from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

These proposals are sponsored by our colleagues both on and off the Committee and from both sides of the aisle - demonstrating the commitment that all of us feel towards improving the lives and well-being of those who have served our nation in uniform.

I look forward to a thorough discussion of the merits and challenges of each of the bills on our agenda this morning and I am grateful to the bill sponsors as well as the witnesses from VA and from our veteran service organization partners for being with us today to present their views, which are so critical to informing how we move forward.

Given our ambitious agenda and the early morning hour, I will refrain from commenting on all of the bills that we will discuss today. However, I do want to briefly discuss the bill that I am proud to sponsor, H.R. 1662.

H.R. 1662 would prohibit smoking inside any Veterans Health Administration (VHA) facility immediately and prohibit smoking outside of any VHA facility over the next five years.

Legislation enacted in 1992 requires VHA to provide smoking areas for patients and visitors. This is contrary to common practice in private sector hospitals and clinics, most of which adopted 100 percent smoke free policies for their facilities, grounds, and buildings many years ago in recognition of how harmful smoking and second-hand smoke exposure can be for patients, visitors, and employees alike.

I recognize that some veterans and VA employees are smokers and that quitting can be a challenging, uphill battle. That is why H.R. 1662 would allow smoking outside of VHA facilities to be phased out over a five year period rather than right away.

VA offers a variety of programs and interventions to support those who are trying to kick their smoking habit and I am hopeful that those who are struggling to quit smoking will take full advantage of those resources.

However, as a doctor and as a veteran, I feel strongly that we cannot continue to allow a practice as toxic and damaging as smoking to continue taking place on VA medical facility campuses, where our most vulnerable patients are trying to heal and our hardest working employees are trying to work.

H.R. 1662 would ensure that VA is in-line with industry standards with regard to smoke-free policies while also ensuring that the money that VA currently spends to maintain designated smoking areas - estimated at more than \$1.2 million annually - and the space that VA designates to smoking both inside and outside of VA medical facilities across the country - which VA told me in January couldn't be estimated - can be reallocated to efforts that improve the health of our veteran's and employees rather than on outdated requirements that we know continue to harm them.

This is common-sense legislation that I hope will have the support of everyone here today.

I would ask unanimous consent to include a letter of support for H.R. 1662 from the Commissioned Officers Association of the U.S. Public Health Service into the record.

I am honored to be joined this morning by several of my colleagues who are going to be testifying about the bills on our agenda that they have sponsored.

I appreciate you all taking time out of your morning to be here with us and for sponsoring legislation to help our veterans.

I would like to once again thank all of our witnesses and audience members for joining us this morning.