

STATEMENT OF
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MEMBER OF CONGRESS

BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH

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Chairman Dunn, Ranking Member Brownley, and my fellow members of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, thank you for the opportunity to testify today about my bill, H.R. 6418, the VA Website Accessibility Act of 2018.

As the Ranking Member of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs Subcommittee, I know all too well how many veterans must live with the wounds of war.

According to the Blinded Veterans Association, there are an estimated over 130,000 legally blinded veterans in the United States, and another 1.5 million with low-vision. These veterans require and deserve the same services and support as other veterans with disabilities. The needs and deservingness of disabled veterans is reflected in law – Section 508 requires the VA Website to be accessible to people with disabilities. However, blind veterans currently face undue challenges accessing VA websites and mobile applications which are often the gateway to VA services and benefits. Navigating the VA's often complicated bureaucracy for the detailed information necessary to apply for VA benefits should not be doubly difficult for our visually impaired veterans. While assistance from a friend or a loved one can be invaluable, not every blind veteran has somebody available at all times to help them access the critical information they need, nor should they have to rely on someone else to help them gain access. Reader apps or other devices provide helpful support but I have heard from blind veterans who say that these apps do not always work on VA websites as required by law.

Perhaps one of the most alarming instances of inadequate access to VA mobile applications was identified earlier this year when the VA updated the Veterans' Crisis Line mobile application, but failed to verify that the update was Section 508 compliant. Visually impaired veterans were unable to access this critical mobile resource. Thankfully, quick action by the Blinded Veterans Association, our staff and calls to the VA corrected this unacceptable error. I know that everyone on the dais shares my opinion that we cannot let things like this happen again.

That is why I introduced the VA Website Accessibility Act which would require a study to determine the accessibility of VA websites to individuals with disabilities. It is incredibly important that this Congress and the VA continue to provide all our veterans, including those with visual impairments, with full access to all the resources and information they need to be successful.

I understand that federal law already requires VA's websites to be accessible to veterans with disabilities. But reports from visually impaired veterans and the VSO community demonstrate that in practice, this is not always the case. I am sure that this is often not intentional, but we must take steps to ensure that total compliance to 508 regulations is the standard 100 percent of the time. Good intentions are not enough. We owe it to all veterans – including the blind and visually-impaired -- to ensure that they are able to access the benefits that they have earned through service to our nation.

I thank the Committee for inviting me to testify today. I hope to see this bill move quickly through this committee and on to the House floor.

Thank you.