

Testimony of Rep. Mike Levin (CA-49)

House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs

Legislative Hearing

Wednesday, October 20, 2021

Chairwoman Luria, Ranking Member Nehls, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for including H.R. 4601, the Commitment to Veteran Support and Outreach (CVSO) Act, and H.R. 4772, the Mark O'Brien Clothing Allowance Improvement Act, in today's legislative hearing. Both are bipartisan, bicameral bills that would improve veterans' ability to use their benefits.

Commitment to Veteran Support and Outreach (CVSO) Act

I introduced the CVSO Act with Representatives Rosendale (R-MT), Ryan (D-OH), and McMorris Rodgers (R-WA) to authorize the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to award competitive grants to expand the work of County Veterans Service Officers (CVSOs) or similar entities.

CVSOs are local county employees who are nationally accredited by the VA to prepare, present, and prosecute VA claims; and are often the first to inform veterans about their eligibility for VA programs and services. They also help enroll veterans into the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and provide assistance on a range of benefits, including service-connected disability compensation, VA home loans, education benefits, and job placement assistance.

The grant funding provided under the CVSO Act will be used to improve outreach to veterans, assist in the development and submittal of claims on behalf of veterans, hire additional CVSOs, and train CVSOs for VA accreditation. It also aligns with the public health model for suicide prevention used by the VA, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and this committee. Specifically, this program will strengthen economic supports, strengthen access to care, and enhance connectedness – key strategies that reduce risk and promote protective factors for suicide.

Mark O'Brien Clothing Allowance Improvement Act

I introduced the Mark O'Brien Clothing Allowance Improvement Act with Representative Moore (R-AL) to improve veterans' access to clothing allowances. The clothing allowance is a benefit for veterans whose prosthetic, orthopedic devices, or skin medicines damage their clothes, and who need this device or skin medicine because of a service-connected condition such as limb loss or severe burns.

I think we would all agree that veterans with service-connected conditions should not be on the hook for the cost of clothing damaged by their prosthetics, orthopedic devices, or medicine. Unfortunately, this currently occurs all too often under the current system. A veteran must file a claim for disability compensation and provide a clothing allowance form to their local VA medical center by August 1st to receive payment that fall. The veteran must then reapply each year in order to receive the benefit again.

For veterans who have lifelong conditions, having to reapply each year is unnecessarily burdensome. My bill would cut this red tape by making the VA clothing allowance an automatic recurring annual payment. VA would periodically review the claim and would only discontinue the allowance if the veteran loses eligibility. This commonsense solution will save time, reduce unnecessary paperwork, and ensure veterans receive the benefits they have earned.

Thank you again for including these important bills in today's hearing. I look forward to working with you to advance them through the legislative process in the coming weeks and months.