

Caring for our Veterans Act (S. 2193)

While there are a number of strong provisions in several community care bills introduced last year, the overall construct and scope of the *Caring for our Veterans Act (S. 2193)*, as well as its strong bipartisan support—make it the best path forward to meet the needs of all generations of veterans

The *Caring for our Veterans Act* would expand access for enrolled veterans by creating an integrated network that consolidates all of VA's existing community care programs—including Choice—into a single, seamless program. **Importantly, decisions about when and where to receive necessary medical care would be made by veterans and their doctors, not by bureaucrats relying on arbitrary time and distance standards.**

To assure quality, VA would remain the coordinator of care whether it is delivered inside VA facilities or through community providers. **Furthermore, the bill would require VA to provide training to community providers in the extended care network so they can share in VA's expertise at treating military-related injuries and illnesses.**

In addition to expanding external access and giving veterans more options, **the bill would bolster VA's internal capacity to deliver timely, quality care through critical new investments in infrastructure and the expansion of telemedicine across state lines.** The legislation would significantly improve VA's ability to recruit, hire and retain medical professionals through new incentives, scholarships and personnel enhancements.

The *Caring for our Veterans Act* would also finally correct the inequity in VA's Comprehensive Caregiver Assistance Program which today is available only to caregivers of veterans injured on or after Sept. 11, 2001. With enactment of this legislation, thousands of family members caring for severely disabled veterans from the Gulf War, Vietnam, Korean and World War II eras would finally be eligible for the full array of benefits and supports they so desperately need.

According to a survey conducted last year, 75 percent of veterans who rely on family caregivers today would need to be institutionalized at much greater expense. VA estimates the cost of long term care for severely disabled veterans can be up to \$400,000 annually whereas the average cost in its caregiver program is under \$30,000 per year. **Expanding VA's comprehensive caregiver program to veterans of all eras is not only the right thing to do for those who served; it's also a smart financial policy for America's taxpayers.**

The *Caring for our Veterans Act* represents a truly bipartisan compromise put together by Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Johnny Isakson (R-Ga.) and Ranking Member Jon Tester (D-Mont.). It builds on a similar proposal put forward by VA's Secretary Dr. David Shulkin and has strong support from veteran service organizations, such as DAV and VFW. **After being approved with a near-unanimous 14 to 1 vote by the Senate Committee in November, it now needs to be debated and voted on by the Senate, agreed to by the House, and sent to the president for his signature.**

At a time when many question the ability of Congress and the federal government to meet their basic obligations, swift approval of the bipartisan *Caring for our Veterans Act* would be a welcome example of how our nation can and should fulfill its sacred promises, particularly those made to the men and women who served.