

117TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

S. 2627

To amend title 38, United States Code, to improve assistance for veterans with travel necessary for counseling, mental health services, health care, and others services furnished by the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

AUGUST 5, 2021

Mr. TESTER (for himself and Mr. MORAN) introduced the following bill; which was read twice and referred to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs

A BILL

To amend title 38, United States Code, to improve assistance for veterans with travel necessary for counseling, mental health services, health care, and others services furnished by the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

3 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

4 This Act may be cited as the “Rural Veterans Travel
5 Enhancement Act of 2021”.

1 **SEC. 2. MAKING PERMANENT AUTHORITY FOR SECRETARY**
2 **OF VETERANS AFFAIRS TO TRANSPORT INDI-**
3 **VIDUALS TO AND FROM DEPARTMENT FA-**
4 **CILITIES.**

5 Section 111A(a) of title 38, United States Code is
6 amended—

7 (1) by striking paragraph (2); and

8 (2) in paragraph (1), by striking “(1)”.

9 **SEC. 3. PERMANENT EXTENSION OF AUTHORIZATION OF**
10 **APPROPRIATIONS FOR GRANTS FOR VET-**
11 **ERANS SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS FOR**
12 **TRANSPORTATION OF HIGHLY RURAL VET-**
13 **ERANS.**

14 Section 307(d) of the Caregivers and Veterans Omni-
15 bus Health Services Act of 2010 (Public Law 111–163;
16 38 U.S.C. 1710 note) is amended to read as follows:

17 “(d) **AUTHORIZATION OF APPROPRIATIONS.**—There
18 are authorized to be appropriated to carry out this section
19 amounts as follows:

20 “(1) \$3,000,000 for each of fiscal years 2010
21 through 2022.

22 “(2) Such sums as may be necessary for fiscal
23 year 2023 and each fiscal year thereafter.”.

1 **SEC. 4. COMPTROLLER GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES**
2 **REPORT ON FRAUD, WASTE, AND ABUSE OF**
3 **THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**
4 **BENEFICIARY TRAVEL PROGRAM.**

5 (a) STUDY AND REPORT REQUIRED.—Not later than
6 three years after the date of the enactment of this Act,
7 the Comptroller General of the United States shall—

8 (1) complete a study on fraud, waste, and abuse
9 of the benefits furnished under section 111 of title
10 38, United States Code, that may have occurred
11 during the five-year period ending on the date of the
12 enactment of this Act; and

13 (2) submit to the Committee on Veterans' Af-
14 fairs of the Senate and the Committee on Veterans'
15 Affairs of the House of Representatives a report on
16 the findings of the Comptroller General with respect
17 to the study completed under paragraph (1).

18 (b) ELEMENTS.—Study conducted under subsection
19 (a)(1) shall cover the following:

20 (1) The quantity and monetary amount of
21 claims that have been adjudicated as fraudulent or
22 improper, disaggregated, to the extent possible, by
23 general health care travel and by special mode of
24 transportation.

25 (2) Instances of potential fraud or improper
26 payments that may have occurred but were not de-

1 tected, disaggregated, to the extent possible, by gen-
2 eral health care travel and by special mode of trans-
3 portation.

4 (3) The efforts of the Secretary of Veterans Af-
5 fairs to mitigate fraud and the effectiveness of the
6 efforts of the Secretary.

7 (4) Assessment of communication and training
8 provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs to
9 employees and contractors handling claims filed
10 under section 111 of such title regarding fraud.

11 (5) Such recommendations as the Comptroller
12 General may have for further mitigation of fraud,
13 waste, and abuse.

14 **SEC. 5. COMPTROLLER GENERAL STUDY AND REPORT ON**
15 **EFFECTIVENESS OF DEPARTMENT OF VET-**
16 **ERANS AFFAIRS BENEFICIARY TRAVEL PRO-**
17 **GRAM MILEAGE REIMBURSEMENT AND DE-**
18 **DUCTIBLE AMOUNTS.**

19 Not later than one year after the date of the enact-
20 ment of this Act, the Comptroller General of the United
21 States shall—

22 (1) complete a study on—

23 (A) the efficacy of the current mileage re-
24 imbursement rate under subsection (a) of sec-
25 tion 111 of title 38, United States Code, in

1 mitigating the financial burden of transpor-
2 tation costs for traveling to and from Depart-
3 ment of Veterans Affairs medical facilities for
4 medical care;

5 (B) the origins of the amount of the de-
6 ductible under subsection (c) of such section
7 and its impact on the efficacy of the benefits
8 provided under such section in mitigating finan-
9 cial burden on veterans seeking medical care;
10 and

11 (C) developing such recommendations as
12 the Comptroller General may have for how the
13 this program or another transportation assist-
14 ance program could further encourage veterans,
15 especially low-income veterans, to seek medical
16 care, especially mental health care; and

17 (2) submit to the Committee on Veterans' Af-
18 fairs of the Senate and the Committee on Veterans'
19 Affairs of the House of Representatives a report on
20 the findings of the Comptroller General with respect
21 to the study completed under paragraph (1).

1 **SEC. 6. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS TRANSPOR-**
2 **TATION PILOT PROGRAM FOR LOW INCOME**
3 **VETERANS.**

4 (a) **PILOT PROGRAM REQUIRED.**—Not later than one
5 year after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Sec-
6 retary of Veterans Affairs shall commence carrying out a
7 pilot program to assess the feasibility and advisability of
8 providing payments authorized under subsection (a) of
9 section 111 of title 38, United States Code, 48 hours in
10 advance of travel to eligible appointments to veterans and
11 other eligible individuals who are also eligible for a deduc-
12 tion waiver as provided by paragraphs (3) and (4) of sub-
13 section (c) of such section.

14 (b) **DURATION.**—The Secretary shall carry out the
15 pilot program during the five-year period beginning on the
16 date of the commencement of the pilot program.

17 (c) **LOCATIONS.**—The Secretary shall carry out the
18 pilot program at not fewer than five locations selected by
19 the Secretary for purposes of the pilot program.

20 (d) **REPORT.**—

21 (1) **IN GENERAL.**—Not later than 180 days
22 after the date of the completion of the pilot pro-
23 gram, the Secretary shall submit to Congress a re-
24 port on the findings of the Secretary with respect to
25 the pilot program.

1 (2) CONTENTS.—The report submitted under
2 paragraph (1) shall include the following:

3 (A) The number of individuals who bene-
4 fitted from the pilot program broken,
5 disaggregated by geographic location, race or
6 ethnicity, age, disability rating, and gender.

7 (B) Average distance traveled by partici-
8 pants to appointments and average funds pro-
9 vided per appointment, disaggregated by geo-
10 graphic region.

11 (C) A description of any impediments to
12 carrying out the pilot program.

13 (D) An account of payments provided for
14 travel that did not occur or was authorized in-
15 correctly.

16 (E) An account of any attempts to retrieve
17 such payment.

18 (F) Recommendations of the Secretary for
19 legislative or administrative action to reduce
20 improper payments.

21 (G) An assessment of the feasibility and
22 advisability of providing payments as described
23 in subsection (a).

1 **SEC. 7. PILOT PROGRAM FOR TRAVEL COST REIMBURSE-**
2 **MENT FOR ACCESSING READJUSTMENT**
3 **COUNSELING SERVICES.**

4 (a) PILOT PROGRAM REQUIRED.—Not later than 180
5 days after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Sec-
6 retary shall establish and commence a pilot program, with-
7 in the Readjustment Counseling Services of the Veterans
8 Health Administration, to assess the feasibility and advis-
9 ability of paying the actual necessary expenses of travel
10 or allowances for travel to and from the nearest Vet Cen-
11 ter.

12 (b) PARTICIPATION.—

13 (1) IN GENERAL.—In carrying out the pilot
14 program required by subsection (a), the Secretary
15 shall limit participation—

16 (A) by individuals pursuant to paragraph
17 (2); and

18 (B) by Vet Centers pursuant to paragraph
19 (3).

20 (2) PARTICIPATION BY INDIVIDUALS.—

21 (A) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary shall
22 limit participation in the pilot program of indi-
23 viduals to individuals who are eligible for serv-
24 ices at a participating Vet Center and experi-
25 encing financial hardship.

1 (B) FINANCIAL HARDSHIP.—The Secretary
2 shall determine the meaning of “financial hard-
3 ship” for purposes of subparagraph (A).

4 (3) PARTICIPATION OF VET CENTERS.—Vet
5 Centers participating in the program shall be chosen
6 by the Secretary from among those serving individ-
7 uals in areas designated by the Secretary as rural or
8 highly rural or Tribal lands.

9 (c) TRAVEL ALLOWANCES AND REIMBURSEMENTS.—

10 (1) IN GENERAL.—Except as provided in para-
11 graph (2), under the pilot program required by sub-
12 section (a), the Secretary shall provide a partici-
13 pating individual a travel allowance or reimburse-
14 ment a minimum of 48 hours before the partici-
15 pating individual is scheduled to be at a partici-
16 pating Vet Center.

17 (2) SPECIAL CASE.—For appointments sched-
18 uled less than 48 hours in advance, reimbursements
19 shall be made available under the pilot program for
20 a participating individual at the earliest time pos-
21 sible.

22 (d) DURATION.—The Secretary shall carry out the
23 pilot program required by subsection (a) during the five-
24 year period beginning on the date of the commencement
25 of the pilot program.

1 (e) LOCATIONS.—The Secretary shall carry out the
2 pilot program at not fewer than five locations selected by
3 the Secretary for purposes of the pilot program.

4 (f) ANNUAL REPORTS.—

5 (1) IN GENERAL.—Not later than one year
6 after the date of the commencement of the pilot pro-
7 gram required by subsection (a) and each year
8 thereafter for the duration of the pilot program, the
9 Secretary shall submit to the Committee on Vet-
10 erans' Affairs of the Senate and the Committee on
11 Veterans' Affairs of the House of Representatives a
12 report on the findings of the Secretary with respect
13 to the pilot program.

14 (2) CONTENTS.—Each report submitted under
15 paragraph (1) shall include the following:

16 (A) The number of individuals who bene-
17 fitted from the pilot program, disaggregated by
18 age, race or ethnicity, and gender, to the extent
19 possible.

20 (B) The average distance traveled by each
21 individual per each Vet Center.

22 (C) The definition of financial hardship de-
23 termined by the Secretary under subsection
24 (b)(2)(B).

1 (D) A description of how the funds are dis-
2 tributed.

3 (E) The average amount of funds distrib-
4 uted per instance, disaggregated by Vet Center.

5 (F) A description of any impediments to
6 the Secretary in paying expenses or allowances
7 under the pilot program.

8 (G) An assessment of any fraudulent re-
9 ceipt of payment under the pilot program and
10 the recommendations of the Secretary for legis-
11 lative or administrative action to reduce such
12 fraud.

13 (H) Such recommendations for legislative
14 or administrative action as the Secretary con-
15 siders appropriate with respect to the payment
16 of expenses or allowances.

17 (g) VET CENTER DEFINED.—In this section, the
18 term “Vet Center” means a center for readjustment coun-
19 seling and related mental health services for veterans
20 under section 1712A of title 38, United States Code.

21 **SEC. 8. PILOT PROGRAM ON GRANTS TO IMPROVE PUBLIC**
22 **TRANSPORTATION SERVICES FOR VETERANS.**

23 (a) GRANT PROGRAM REQUIRED.—Not later than
24 one year after the date of the enactment of this Act, the
25 Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall commence carrying out

1 a pilot program to assess the feasibility and advisability
2 of awarding grants to eligible entities to improve public
3 transportation services for veterans.

4 (b) DURATION.—The Secretary shall carry out the
5 pilot program during the five-year period beginning on the
6 date on which the pilot program commences.

7 (c) LOCATIONS.—The Secretary shall carry out the
8 pilot program at not fewer than five locations selected by
9 the Secretary for purposes of the pilot program.

10 (d) AWARD OF GRANTS.—

11 (1) IN GENERAL.—In carrying out the pilot
12 program, the Secretary shall award grants to eligible
13 entities to expand, retain, or establish public trans-
14 portation services that provide veterans access to lo-
15 cations of facilities or organizations that serve vet-
16 erans, including—

17 (A) facilities of the Department of Vet-
18 erans Affairs; and

19 (B) organizations that provide services to
20 veterans using funds provided by the Depart-
21 ment.

22 (2) ELIGIBLE ENTITIES.—For purposes of this
23 section, an eligible entity is any State, Tribal, coun-
24 ty, or city government that—

1 (A) is providing public transportation serv-
2 ices as of the date on which the pilot program
3 commences; or

4 (B) has a proven ability and intention to
5 establish public transportation infrastructure.

6 (3) INTERVALS OF PAYMENT AND MAXIMUM
7 GRANT AMOUNT.—The Secretary may establish in-
8 tervals of payment for the administration of grants
9 under this section and a maximum grant amount to
10 be awarded, in accordance with the services being
11 provided and the duration of such services.

12 (4) COORDINATION AND CONSULTATION.—In
13 awarding grants under this section, the Secretary
14 may coordinate and consult with the Secretary of
15 Transportation.

16 (5) EQUITABLE DISTRIBUTION.—The Secretary
17 of Veterans Affairs shall ensure that, to the extent
18 practicable, grants awarded under this section are
19 equitably distributed across geographic regions, in-
20 cluding rural and Tribal communities.

21 (e) GRANT APPLICATION.—

22 (1) IN GENERAL.—An eligible entity seeking
23 the award of a grant under this section shall submit
24 to the Secretary an application therefor in such
25 form, in such manner, and containing such commit-

1 ments and information as the Secretary considers
2 necessary to carry out this section.

3 (2) CONTENTS OF APPLICATION.—Each appli-
4 cation submitted by an eligible entity under para-
5 graph (1) shall contain the following:

6 (A) A description of the public transpor-
7 tation services that the entity intends to provide
8 under the grant.

9 (B) A list of all sites accessed by the pub-
10 lic transportation services to be provided.

11 (C) The schedule of such services.

12 (D) A list of the locations of facilities and
13 organizations that serve veterans that will be
14 accessed by such services.

15 (E) An estimate of the number of veterans
16 that would use such services.

17 (F) Evidence of the ability of the entity to
18 provide such services.

19 (f) NOTIFICATION TO VETERANS.—Each eligible en-
20 tity awarded a grant under this section shall notify vet-
21 erans of the expansion or establishment of public transpor-
22 tation services to locations of facilities or organizations
23 that serve veterans and that those services are available
24 in whole or in part due to funds provided by the Depart-
25 ment.

1 (g) REPORT ON SERVICES PROVIDED.—The Sec-
2 retary shall require each eligible entity awarded a grant
3 under this section to submit to the Secretary a report that
4 describes the expansion, retention, or establishment of
5 public transportation services provided with amounts
6 under such grant.

7 (h) REPORT.—

8 (1) IN GENERAL.—Not later than one year
9 after the date on which the first grant is awarded
10 under this section, the Secretary shall submit to the
11 Committee on Veterans' Affairs of the Senate and
12 the Committee on Veterans' Affairs of the House of
13 Representatives a report on the services provided
14 under the pilot program.

15 (2) ELEMENTS.—The report required by para-
16 graph (1) shall include the following:

17 (A) The geographic location of each recipi-
18 ent of a grant under this section.

19 (B) The estimated number of veterans
20 served by each such grant recipient.

21 (C) An assessment of whether use of facili-
22 ties of the Department has increased due to ac-
23 cess to public transportation provided under

1 grants awarded under this section, if informa-
2 tion for such an assessment is available.

○