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Remarks on Signing the Veterans Choice Program Extension and Improvement Act

April 19, 2017

The President. Good morning. We're honored to join and be joined today by some absolutely tremendous people and great veterans. Thanks, as well—and I have to thank them dearly—but as well to Representative Phil Roe. Where is he? I love Phil, come here. What a job you've done. And all the Members of Congress who worked on the bill that we're about to sign, such an important bill.

I especially want to thank Senators John McCain and Senator Johnny Isakson. They have been incredible in working with us. Let me also welcome my good friend, Florida Governor Rick Scott, a Navy veteran who's here with us to represent more than a million veterans from the State of Florida. We're also joined by the leaders of a number of veterans groups. I want to thank all of them for being here and all of the tremendous and important work that they do. We would not be here if it weren't for them, I can tell you that.

Finally, I want to thank our Secretary of the VA, David Shulkin, who, by the way, was approved with a vote of 100 to nothing. [*Laughter*] That's shocking, right? [*Laughter*] A hundred to nothing, Rick. Now, you wouldn't get a hundred to nothing. [*Laughter*]

We met earlier today in the Oval Office, and Secretary Shulkin updated me on the massive and chronic challenge he inherited at the VA, but also the great progress that he is making. He's got a group of people that are phenomenal at the VA. It's one of my most important things. I've been telling all of our friends at speeches and rallies for 2 years about the VA, how we're going to turn it around. And we're doing that.

And actually, next week, on Thursday at 2 o'clock, we're going to have a news conference with David and some others to tell you about all of the tremendous things that are happening at the VA and what we've done in terms of progress and achievement.

The veterans have poured out their sweat and blood and tears for this country for so long, and it's time that they're recognized, and it's time that we now take care of them and take care of them properly.

That's why I'm pleased today to sign into law the Veterans Choice Program Improvement Act. So this is called the Choice Program Improvement Act. Speaks for itself. This bill will extend and improve the Veterans Choice Program so that more veterans can see the doctor of their choice—you got it? The doctor of their choice—and don't have to wait and travel long distances for VA care. Some people have to travel 5 hours, 8 hours, and they'll have to do it on a weekly basis and even worse than that. It's not going to happen anymore.

This new law is a good start, but there is still much work to do. We will fight each and every day to deliver the long-awaited reforms our veterans deserve and to protect those who have so courageously protected each and every one of us.

So we've made a lot of strides for the veterans. These are, like, the most incredible people we have in our country as far as I'm concerned, and they have not been taken care of properly.

I want to thank David. You've done an incredible job. And you're going to see some of that on Thursday. So thank you all very much. And we're going to sign this. And I think I'm going to

have to give this pen—the way I look at it, we should probably give it to Phil. What do you think?

Participant. I agree.

The President. Does everybody agree? I think Phil is——

Representative D. Phillip Roe. I'll agree to that. [*Laughter*]

The President. Phil is—yes, I know—[*inaudible*]. So congratulations, everybody. Really fantastic. Thank you very much.

[*At this point, the President signed the bill.*]

Okay. Phil, maybe you could say a few words, if you'd like.

Rep. Roe. Well, Mr. President, thank you very much. And this was a very, very important bill to get started with so we can get Choice 2.0 to get to the place exactly where the President said he wanted to be. And it's a privilege to work with all of these great people up here to help make the VA better.

I spent last week on the break going to Los Angeles and Phoenix to get a firsthand view of what's going on. And what we want to do is put the veteran in charge of these choices, not the bureaucracy. And I think Dr. Shulkin is just the person to see that happen. Mr. President, thank you so much for making it happen.

The President. Thank you very much. It's fantastic.

And David? Where's David?

Secretary of Veterans Affairs David J. Shulkin. Yes, I'm right behind you, Mr. President.

The President. Why don't you go ahead. I won't look back. You just talk. [*Laughter*]

Secretary Shulkin. Well, first of all, I want to thank everybody here as well and thank Congress for seeing this done and Mr. President to be signing this.

This is a good day for veterans. This is a great day to celebrate not only what veterans have contributed to the country, but how we're making things better for them. And by working together, we're going to continue this progress. I think, as the President said, we're actually going to do this a week from Thursday, Mr. President——

The President. Right.

Secretary Shulkin. ——and talk about the tremendous accomplishments, but most importantly, about the great things that are going to come to fulfill the President's commitments that he made to veterans. And so thank you all for being here today.

The President. Well, thank you. Great job. So again, next week, on Thursday, at 2 o'clock—it may change a little bit, but about that time—we're going to have a conference to talk about the progress and the achievement.

I'd like to ask Rick Scott, the Governor of Florida—who's done a fantastic job as Governor, by the way, and really understands this subject and really understands a lot of subjects—Rick, do you want to say a few words?

Governor Richard L. Scott of Florida. Sure. Well, I was really proud of my father—was in the 82d Airborne, he did all the combat jumps, and I grew up listening to all his—the stories about the war. I had the serve—I had the opportunity to serve in the Navy. Unfortunately, in

2014, I had to sue the VA because we had—our State health care agency couldn't go inspect their hospitals when we heard all the stories about deaths, delays, and poor conditions.

And so President—Mr. President, and I want to thank Congress for doing this to create certainty of care while we figure out how to fix the VA system. And, David, I want to thank you for what you're doing. You've got absolutely the right background to do this. I know President Trump has been focused on our veterans and our military before he was President, and I know he's going to continue to do a great job. We have 1.5 million veterans. I want them all to move to Florida, of course. [*Laughter*] So—but thank you for doing this, Mr. President.

The President. Thank you very much.

Most importantly, thank you, thank all of the great veterans. We appreciate—would you like to say something? We have all of these people out there. [*Laughter*] You'll become a movie star tomorrow. [*Laughter*] You look so good.

Paralyzed Veterans of America Executive Director Sherman Gillums, Jr. Well, our Nation will be judged by how it treats its veterans, and the future of our country will rely on generations—right now, they're children, but they're going to be our future servicemen. And so we have to treat veterans well. It's about national security, it's about patriotism, and this is a great step forward to doing that.

The President. Thank you very much. Nobody can say it better than that, so we're going to end. [*Laughter*] But I want to just thank you all. Thank you for being here. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:32 a.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. S. 544, approved April 19, was assigned Public Law No. 115–26.

Categories: Bill Signings and Vetoes : Veterans Choice Program Extension and Improvement Act, signing remarks.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Gillums, Sherman, Jr.; Isakson, John H.; McCain, John S., III; Roe, D. Phillip; Scott, Richard L.; Shulkin, David J.

Subjects: Congress : Senate :: Presidential nominations, confirmation process; Florida : Governor; Legislation, enacted : Veterans Choice Program Extension and Improvement Act; Veterans : Health and medical care; Veterans : Service and dedication; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Secretary.

DCPD Number: DCPD201700256.