

REP. CORRINE BROWN, RANKING MEMBER, COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS NOTABLE ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF 114TH CONGRESS

HON. CORRINE BROWN

OF FLORIDA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, December 8, 2016

Ms. BROWN of Florida. Mr. Speaker, U.S. Representative CORRINE BROWN, has been a member of the House Veterans Committee for 23 years becoming its Ranking Member at the beginning of the 114th Congress. Because of my long tenure my work in key policy areas bridges from one Congress to the next. With that said, here are a few highlights of my accomplishments in the 114th Congress:

RESTRUCTURING THE VA BUDGET

I sponsored the Department of Veterans Affairs Budget Planning Reform Act, H.R. 216, which restructures the VA's budget based on how much it costs to deliver services to veterans. It sets down the requirements for knowing what their needs are and then draws up a budget that will meet those needs.

In its present form, the Department of Veterans Affairs budget process does not provide sufficient information on not only current resource requirements, but also future funding needs. To improve the budget formulation process and by extension, the Committee's understanding of the Departments goals and the resources needed to meet those goals H.R. 216 reforms the manner in which the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) determines, plans for, and delivers health care, benefits and services, by requiring the VA to periodically review and assess veterans' needs, identify a plan of action to meet these changing needs, and align its resource requirements with its current, and future, operations.

H.R. 216 passed the House on March 24, 2016 by a vote of 420-0, and awaits action in the Senate.

CLEARING LOGJAMS IN HOSPITAL CONSTRUCTION

Funding caps, contractor lawsuits and design changes have delayed and even threatened the opening of new VA medical facilities.

By consistently concentrating on getting hospitals open I helped the Veterans Committee bypass the partisan infighting and legislative stalemates that threatened to shutter new construction projects. I led the effort to garner support among the Democratic Caucus for down-to-the-wire emergency funding necessary to finish new construction projects, while at the same time, working in close coordination with VA Secretary McDonald and the Chairman of the House Veterans Committee to provide necessary assurances that those at the VA responsible for malfeasance in new hospital construction would be held accountable. The funding passed the House September 30, 2015 as part of an omnibus bill to continue to fund the government after a previous continuing resolution expired.

CHOICE PROGRAM

Veterans cite access to health care, both physical and mental care, as their most important benefit. The Veterans Choice program was enacted by the 113th Congress as a temporary program in the wake of the wait time scandal that was endemic across the VA in 2014. In the first full year after enactment, VA made 1.6 million more appointments than it did the year before. Though she was not the Ranking Member of the Vet-

erans Committee at the time of enactment, she was a conferee and participated fully in the negotiations that led to the program's inception.

Since I became the Ranking Member, VA has proposed following the current Choice program with a more permanent program and has presented the Committee with a long-term strategy for consolidation of community care programs.

One of the essential elements is that the plan streamlines eligibility requirements for veterans to receive increased access to care in their communities from non-VA providers. The goals of the new Choice program include making access to community care easier to understand, improving the veterans' experience, clarifying the program for VA staff, and make it easier for community providers to partner with VA, provide seamless connections between VA and community providers and apply best practices from the private sector.

I have taken a leadership role in three key areas to help in the implementation of the new program:

1. Encouraging veterans to sign up for care. In opening statements before Full Committee hearings and repeatedly in public forums at home and in Washington, I have expressed frustration that too many veterans don't sign up for the VA care they are entitled to. In order to overcome any doubts about the quality of care veterans may have after the drumbeat of negative news about the VA after the wait time scandals in 2013, I counter the negative images summarizing survey figures indicating that once they are in the system and receiving care, veterans are extremely satisfied with the quality of that care.

2. Recognizing that there were implementation problems and that unusually close coordination between Congress and the VA would cut through them faster, I called meetings with Democratic House Members and VA Secretary Robert McDonald to allow members to air concerns, prioritize changes that needed to be made, and determine whether legislation would be needed to fix the problems.

3. The absence of a workable provider agreement proved to be a major logjam in the delivery of Choice Program care. Upon discovering this, I led an effort among House Committee members to put in place a simple two-page provider agreement so more private care doctors could begin delivering services to veterans and be paid in a timely manner.

OPIOIDS

Opioid abuse is a rampant problem which cuts across all socioeconomic classes. Recognizing that wounded veterans are at risk for the over prescription of opioids for pain treatment, I advocated for VA to initiate a program of ensuring alternative treatment techniques. In May, 2016, the House passed a bipartisan package of bills to battle America's growing epidemic of painkiller abuse and heroin addiction focusing on opioid addiction, treatment and prevention. An important element was the PROMISE Act, which will help improve VA opioid safety, and provide Veterans with safe, personalized care to deal with their physical and invisible wounds including using alternative treatment techniques. From the beginning, the PROMISE Act is a bipartisan bill. It is currently being conferenced with similar legislation which passed the Senate.

WOMEN VETERANS

I introduced H.R. 1575, which makes permanent a highly successful pilot program to provide counseling in retreat settings for women veterans newly separated from service in the Armed Forces. Women veterans

transitioning from active duty experience readjustment issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), military sexual trauma, substance abuse, and homelessness similar to their male counterparts, yet there are indications that military service may affect women differently than men. Research has shown that women exposed to stressful situations like combat or military sexual trauma react differently than their male counterparts, and female veterans commit suicide at nearly six times the rate of other women.

Ensuring that VA is properly addressing the unique needs of women veterans is an essential component of the Committee's oversight efforts. During the 111th Congress, the Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010 (P.L. 111-163, 124 Stat. 1130) required VA to conduct, through the Readjustment Counseling Service Vet Center Program (RCS), a pilot program to evaluate the feasibility and advisability of providing reintegration and readjustment services in group retreat settings to women veterans recently separated from service in the Armed Forces after a prolonged deployment. The pilot program ran for two years. Evaluation data was gathered pre-retreat, immediately post-retreat, and 2-month post-retreat. Written feedback from the veteran participants immediately after the retreats was unanimously positive for both years and RCS received several letters from participants expressing their gratitude for the opportunity. More importantly, the majority of the women veterans who participated in the retreats showed improvements in their psychological well-being, decreased stress symptoms, improved stress coping skills, and a reduction in the severity of their PTSD symptoms immediately both following the retreat and 2-months post retreat. H.R. 1575 was reported to the House by the Veterans Committee on November 2, 2015, and awaits consideration on the House Floor.

I cosponsored H.R. 1948, the Veterans' Access to Child Care Act, sponsored by Rep. Julia Brownley, Ranking Member of the Health Subcommittee. It expands and makes permanent a successful pilot which provides drop off child care services for veterans with appointments at a VA medical center. Studies of the four original sites in the pilot showed that the program is extremely popular with veterans, particularly veterans who are grandparents. The program also proved to have been effective in reducing "no show" appointments at VA.

HOMELESS VETERANS

I sponsored H.R. 5407, the Homeless Veterans with Children Reintegration Act. It directs the Secretary of Labor to put homeless veterans with dependent children at the top of the list to receive services through the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP). This program provides grants to local workforce boards, non-profits, and community and faith-based organizations to help homeless veterans find jobs.

HVRP is one of the few nationwide federal programs focusing exclusively on helping homeless veterans reintegrate into the workforce. By making veterans with children the priority to receive the temporary housing and the wrap-around services necessary to support a single working parent with children, it is my hope that vulnerable families will stabilize, move on to permanent housing and employment, and one-by-one, never be forced to spend another night in an unsafe environment. The bill would also require DOL to study access to shelter, safety and other relevant services for homeless veterans with dependent children. This information would help us understand the problem and identify opportunities to resolve issues facing homeless veterans with children. A hearing was held on June 23 in the Committee on

Veterans Affairs. Testimony in support of its passage was received from the American Legion Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America and the Vietnam Veterans of America.

DISABLED VETERANS

IT Accessibility for Visually Impaired Veterans—In February, 2015, I pushed the VA Secretary to ensure the agency is compliant with laws requiring VA website accessibility for disabled veterans, particularly for visually impaired veterans, and received the George “Buck” Gillispie Award from the Blinded American Veterans Foundation in June, 2016.

Caregivers—In 2010, the Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act (P.L. 111-163) was enacted to provide comprehensive caregiver support to caregivers of veterans severely injured or disabled after September 11, 2001. I strongly advocated for the enactment of the original program. In the six years since, I have spoken with many caregivers in my district who have benefited from the program, but also heard from caregivers who have given up careers to provide unpaid care for veterans suffering from illness rather than injuries, or who were injured or became ill before 9/11. I strongly favor expanding this highly successful program to provide support for them by cosponsoring H.R. 1969, the Military and Veteran Caregiver Services Improvement Act. The bill has been referred to the Veterans Committee and several other committees continue to push for hearings and has advocated about the need to find the necessary funding by closing tax loopholes and not cutting other VA programs.

HONORING AND MEMORIALIZING VETERANS AND SURVIVING SPOUSES

I sponsored H.R. 3715, the Final Farewell Act of 2016. It provides for Saturday burials for any eligible veteran or spouse at any of the nation's 134 National Veterans' Cemeteries in light of the preference in certain communities and cultures in the US who, by tradition, hold burial services on Saturdays. This makes it possible for family members to be comforted when they need it most. H.R. 3715 passed the House by voice vote on May 23, 2016.

Introduced H.R. 5059 the Love Lives On Act of 2016, April 26, 2016, which allows spouses to continue to receive survival benefits should they remarry, which has been, referred to Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs. I am working with Veteran Service Organizations such as the Gold Star Wives of America and Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) to garner the support and find the funding offsets needed to make this bill a priority and move it forward.

I took the lead in the effort by Members of Congress on the House side for the inclusion in H.R. 4909, the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) and H.R. 4974, the 2017 Military Construction Appropriations and Veterans Affairs Act of \$5 Million (through the Department of Defense) to support the Women in Military Service to America Memorial (WIMSA) at Arlington Cemetery. WIMSA recognizes and honors the service of women in the military throughout the country's history. The 2017 funding is primarily for maintenance and renovation of the Memorial's building, which is in serious disrepair. Funding for the WIMSA's educational programs and exhibitions come from private fundraising. These efforts were successful. H.R. 4909 passed the House on May 26 and is awaiting action in the Senate. H.R. 4974, passed the House on May 19 and the House-Senate Conference Report passed the House June 22.

COMMENDING THE WASHINGTON REGIONAL ALCOHOL PROGRAM AND THE KICKOFF OF SOBERRIDE

HON. GERALD E. CONNOLLY

OF VIRGINIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, December 8, 2016

Mr. CONNOLLY. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to recognize the Washington Regional Alcohol Program (WRAP) and to congratulate the recipients of the Law Enforcement Awards for Excellence.

Founded in 1982, WRAP is an award-winning, public-private coalition formed to fight drunk driving, drugged driving, and underage drinking in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan region. Through educational and innovative public outreach programs, WRAP is credited with keeping local alcohol-related death rates consistently below the national average. Its programs educate students and the general public on the dangers of alcohol and drugs, particularly driving while under the influence. Through the WRAP Holiday SoberRide program, individuals who are impaired can request a free cab ride home. Since SoberRide was launched in 1993, 65,385 free cab rides have been provided in the Washington Metropolitan area, preventing potential accidents and deaths.

In 1982, the year that WRAP was founded, 26,173 people in the United States lost their lives in alcohol-related car accidents, and 60 percent of all traffic fatalities involved drunk driving. Due to the tireless efforts of WRAP, other organizations such as MADD and SADD, local and state police, and enforcement of more stringent anti-drunk driving laws, considerable progress has been made in decreasing the number of alcohol-related traffic fatalities, yet more still must be done. In 2015, 10,265 people died in the United States in alcohol-related crashes which represents 29 percent of all traffic fatalities. Sadly, this is a 3.2 percent increase over the 2014 fatalities which totaled 9,967.

Since 1997, WRAP has sponsored an annual Law Enforcement Awards Ceremony to honor local law enforcement professionals who have gone above and beyond the call of duty in the fight against drunk driving. It is my honor to include the following names of the Law Enforcement Awards of Excellence for Impaired Driving Prevention recipients:

Officer Wesley Vitale, City of Alexandria Police Department;

Officer John Clark, Arlington County Police Department;

PFC Kevin Hedden, City of Falls Church Police Department;

Second Lieutenant Jason Long, Fairfax County Police Department;

Private First Class Eliezer Calo, Herndon Police Department;

Deputy Jason Totaro, Loudoun County Sheriff's Office;

Trooper First Class Anthony Wallace, Maryland State Police;

Officer David Naples, Metropolitan Police Department;

Police Officer III John P. Romack, Montgomery County Department of Police;

Police Officer III Alex Latifov, Montgomery County Department of Police;

Corporal Sage Saliba, Prince George's County Police Department;

Officer Jeremy A. Schenck, Prince William County Police Department;

Officer Benjamin Tomasiello, United States Park Police;

Trooper Zachary Koon, Virginia State Police.

Mr. Speaker, I ask that my colleagues join me in congratulating the recipients of the Law Enforcement Awards of Excellence and in recognizing WRAP for its 34 years of public service. I commend the staff of WRAP under the leadership of President Kurt Erickson for their tireless dedication to eradicating underage drinking and drunk or drugged driving. Their efforts combined with the support of partner organizations and law enforcement agencies have truly saved lives and are deserving of our highest praise and gratitude.

IN RECOGNITION OF ISRAEL'S 68TH INDEPENDENCE DAY

HON. CAROLYN B. MALONEY

OF NEW YORK

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, December 8, 2016

Mrs. CAROLYN B. MALONEY of New York. Mr. Speaker, I rise to celebrate Israel's 68th Independence Day commemorating the day before the expiration of the British Mandate in 1948, when Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion declared the establishment of Israel as the sovereign state of the Jewish people. I am pleased to celebrate that defining moment, as well as Israel's remarkable growth and success.

When the United Nations issued Resolution 181 on November 29, 1947, approving the Special Committee on Palestine's partition plan establishing a Jewish and an Arab state, it seemed to be the culmination of decades of hard work and bold dreams. On May 14, 1948 (5 Iyar), as the British Mandate was coming to an end, David Ben-Gurion held a special ceremony at the Tel Aviv Museum and read the Declaration of Independence (Megilat HaAtzma'ut), announcing the establishment of a Jewish nation to be known as Israel. The members of the Provisional State Council joined him in signing the document. America recognized Israel just after midnight on May 15, moments after the new nation was proclaimed.

Since that day the relationship between the United States and Israel has strengthened and flourished. Israel remains a beacon of hope and justice in an otherwise tumultuous region. Democracy, freedom of expression, an independent judiciary and government by the rule of law are among the ideals shared by our two nations. As a result of our common outlook, the bonds of friendship between our two nations are strong and unbreakable.

Like the United States, Israel is a nation of immigrants and draws its strength from the diversity and tenacity of its people. Israel has been a haven for Jews from every part of the globe, particularly those fleeing discrimination and expulsion. Israel has succeeded in integrating diverse populations and making them part of Israeli culture.

By investing in its citizens, Israel has proven that a creative and resourceful population can overcome a lack of natural resources. Lacking potable water, Israel is at the forefront of desalination efforts. Lacking arable land, it has