

Certain veteran communities are still being left behind.

Women veterans, Native American veterans, veterans from the U.S. territories, and veterans with disabilities face challenges and aspire to jobs that differ from the broader population of returning servicemembers. We cannot be satisfied with a program that allows large groups of veterans to slip through the cracks.

The Improving Transition Programs for All Veterans Act is a bipartisan bill that requires the VA to launch a research program examining if and how the current program meets the needs of minority veterans groups.

In collaboration with the Departments of Labor and Defense, the bill would require the VA to recommend changes to TAP that would address barriers and better serve these veterans in their pursuit of meaningful employment following their military service.

More than ever before, our military reflects America's diverse mix of people and cultures. Each of these transitioning servicemembers, regardless of gender, race, or disability, has made the same commitment to defending this Nation.

□ 1700

All of them deserve our full support when they return home.

I am proud to have introduced this bill with the gentlewoman from American Samoa (Mrs. RADEWAGEN).

I want to thank Mr. WENSTRUP, chair of the Economic Opportunity Subcommittee, and Chairman MILLER for their support in moving this forward.

Mr. Speaker, I call on my colleagues to promptly pass this legislation.

Ms. BROWN of Florida. Mr. Speaker, I yield 4 minutes to the gentlewoman from New Hampshire (Ms. KUSTER).

Ms. KUSTER. Mr. Speaker, today I rise to discuss bipartisan efforts to improve the work our Nation does to care for our veterans.

Next week we will be honoring those who gave their lives for this country on Memorial Day. We will commemorate the lives and the sacrifices of those who died while wearing the uniform of the United States of America. We will rightly recognize their courage and commitment, but we must also ensure we continue to recognize the same courage and dedication found in our veterans and Active-Duty personnel and the challenges that many of them face as they transition into civilian life.

The Improving Transition Programs for All Veterans Act will allow Congress, the VA, and the Departments of Labor and Defense to better understand these challenges. The study created by this bill will allow us to understand what is working, what is not working, and how veterans can best be placed in a position to succeed once they transition to civilian life.

It will allow us to better understand the challenges, the unique challenges,

faced by the growing number of female veterans in our population, a group that generally has a higher unemployment rate and lower post-military salaries than their male counterparts.

Mr. Speaker, I urge my colleagues to support this bill so that we can more effectively allocate resources dedicated to assisting veterans in their transition out of uniform and support several other great veterans bills on the floor today that would assist veteran caregivers and ensure that the VA develops plans to hire permanent medical center directors.

Ms. BROWN of Florida. Mr. Speaker, again, I want to thank the bipartisan committee for coming up with this bill.

Mr. Speaker, I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. MILLER of Florida. Mr. Speaker, I urge all Members to support this legislation.

I yield back the balance of my time.

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. DUNCAN of Tennessee). The question is on the motion offered by the gentleman from Florida (Mr. MILLER) that the House suspend the rules and pass the bill (H.R. 5229), as amended.

The question was taken; and (two-thirds being in the affirmative) the rules were suspended and the bill, as amended, was passed.

A motion to reconsider was laid on the table.

VA HEALTH CENTER MANAGEMENT STABILITY AND IMPROVEMENT ACT

Mr. MILLER of Florida. Mr. Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and pass the bill (H.R. 3956) to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to develop and implement a plan to hire directors of the medical centers of the Department of Veterans Affairs, as amended.

The Clerk read the title of the bill.

The text of the bill is as follows:

H.R. 3956

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.

This Act may be cited as the "VA Health Center Management Stability and Improvement Act".

SEC. 2. FINDINGS.

Congress finds the following:

(1) According to data from the Department of Veterans Affairs, several medical centers of the Department are managed by acting or temporary directors.

(2) Some of these medical centers have not been managed by a permanent director for a long period.

(3) Pursuant to section 317.903 of title 5, Code of Federal Regulations, a member of the senior executive service who is detailed to a temporary position in a department or agency of the Federal Government may not serve in that position for periods longer than 120-day increments, and no member of the senior executive service may be detailed to an unclassified position for a period longer than 240 days.

(4) The inability of the Department of Veterans Affairs to recruit qualified, permanent candidates as directors of medical centers,

combined with the policies described in paragraph (3), leads to frequent turnover of directors at the medical centers which impedes the ability of system management to engage in long-term planning and other functions necessary to improve service delivery to veterans.

(5) The Secretary of Veterans Affairs should develop a comprehensive plan to recruit permanent directors at each medical center that lacks a permanent director.

SEC. 3. PLAN TO HIRE DIRECTORS OF MEDICAL CENTERS OF DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS.

(a) PLAN.—Not later than 120 days after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall develop and implement a plan to hire highly qualified directors for each medical center of the Department of Veterans Affairs that lacks a permanent director as of the date of the plan. The Secretary shall prioritize the hiring of such directors for the medical centers that have not had a permanent director for the longest periods.

(b) MATTERS INCLUDED.—The plan developed under subsection (a) shall include the following:

(1) A deadline to hire the directors of the medical centers of the Department as described in such subsection.

(2) Identification of the possible impediments to such hiring.

(3) Identification of opportunities to promote and train candidates from within the Department to senior executive positions in the Department, including as directors of medical centers.

(c) SUBMISSION.—Not later than 120 days after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Secretary shall submit to the Committees on Veterans' Affairs of the House of Representatives and the Senate the plan developed under subsection (a).

(d) SEMIANNUAL REPORTS.—Not later than 180 days after the date of the enactment of this Act, and each 180-day period thereafter until January 1, 2018, the Secretary shall submit to the Committees on Veterans' Affairs of the House of Representatives and the Senate a list of each medical center of the Department that lacks a permanent director as of the date of the report.

SEC. 4. COMPLIANCE WITH SCHEDULING REQUIREMENTS.

(a) ANNUAL CERTIFICATION.—

(1) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall ensure that the director of each medical facility of the Department of Veterans Affairs annually certifies to the Secretary that the medical facility is in full compliance with all provisions of law and regulations relating to scheduling appointments for veterans to receive hospital care and medical services, including pursuant to Veterans Health Administration Directive 2010-027, or any successor directive.

(2) PROHIBITION ON WAIVER.—The Secretary may not waive any provision of the laws or regulations described in paragraph (1) for a medical facility of the Department if such provision otherwise applies to the medical facility.

(b) EXPLANATION OF NONCOMPLIANCE.—If a director of a medical facility of the Department does not make a certification under subsection (a)(1) for any year, the director shall submit to the Secretary a report containing—

(1) an explanation of why the director is unable to make such certification; and

(2) a description of the actions the director is taking to ensure full compliance with the laws and regulations described in such subsection.

(c) PROHIBITION ON BONUSES BASED ON NONCOMPLIANCE.—

(1) IN GENERAL.—If a director of a medical facility of the Department does not make a

certification under subsection (a)(1) for any year, each covered official described in paragraph (2) may not receive an award or bonus under chapter 45 or 53 of title 5, United States Code, or any other award or bonus authorized under such title or title 38, United States Code, during the year following the year in which the certification was not made.

(2) COVERED OFFICIAL.—A covered official described in this paragraph is each official who serves in the following positions at a medical facility of the Department during a year, or portion thereof, for which the director does not make a certification under subsection (a)(1):

- (A) The director.
- (B) The chief of staff.
- (C) The associate director.
- (D) The associate director for patient care.
- (E) The deputy chief of staff.

(d) ANNUAL REPORT.—The Secretary shall annually submit to the Committees on Veterans' Affairs of the House of Representatives and the Senate a report containing, with respect to the year covered by the report—

(1) a list of each medical facility of the Department for which a certification was made under subsection (a)(1); and

(2) a list of each medical facility of the Department for which such a certification was not made, including a copy of each report submitted to the Secretary under subsection (b).

SEC. 5. UNIFORM APPLICATION OF DIRECTIVES AND POLICIES OF DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS.

(a) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall ensure that the directives and policies of the Department of Veterans Affairs apply to each office or facility of the Department in a uniform manner.

(b) NOTIFICATION.—If the Secretary does not uniformly apply the directives and policies of the Department pursuant to subsection (a), including by waiving such a directive or policy with respect to an office, facility, or element of the Department, the Secretary shall notify the Committees on Veterans' Affairs of the House of Representatives and the Senate of such nonuniform application, including an explanation for the nonuniform application.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the rule, the gentleman from Florida (Mr. MILLER) and the gentlewoman from Florida (Ms. BROWN) each will control 20 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from Florida.

GENERAL LEAVE

Mr. MILLER of Florida. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members have 5 legislative days within which to revise and extend their remarks.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from Florida?

There was no objection.

Mr. MILLER of Florida. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Mr. Speaker, I rise in support of H.R. 3956, as amended, the VA Health Center Management Stability and Improvement Act. H.R. 3956, as amended, is sponsored by my good friend, colleague, and fellow committee member, Congressman BOST of Illinois.

H.R. 3956, as amended, also contains provisions from H.R. 4977, the VA Scheduling Accountability Act, which

is sponsored by Congresswoman JACKIE WALORSKI from Indiana, who is also an active Veterans' Affairs Committee member.

There has been a tremendous amount of turnover among the Department of Veterans Affairs medical center leaders in the last few years. According to the Deputy Secretary of VA Sloan Gibson, over half of Veterans Health Administration senior leader positions turned over from October 2013 to October 2015. Without consistent, high-quality leadership in VA medical centers, our veterans aren't being served as well as they could be or they should be.

H.R. 3956, as amended, would direct VA to develop and implement a plan to hire a director for each VA medical center without a permanent director and prioritize hiring at VA medical centers that have not had a permanent director for the longest periods of time. Once stable leadership is in place, we need to ensure that they are held accountable.

One of the contributing factors behind the access to care crisis that plagued the VA healthcare system in 2014 was the failure of VA medical centers to comply with VA scheduling policies. To avoid that in the future, H.R. 3956, as amended, would require VA to ensure that directives and policies apply uniformly across the entire department and require VA medical center directors to annually certify compliance with the scheduling directive or any successor directive that replaces it. If a facility fails to comply, leaders at that facility would be prohibited from receiving a bonus.

I am grateful to both Congressman BOST and Congresswoman WALORSKI for their efforts on this legislation on behalf of our Nation's veterans.

Mr. Speaker, I urge my colleagues to support the passage of H.R. 3956, as amended.

I reserve the balance of my time.

Ms. BROWN of Florida. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of H.R. 3956, as amended. This bill finds that multiple VA centers are managed by acting or temporary directors—some of these centers have lacked a permanent director for a long time; there are time limits as to how long a Senior Executive Service employee can be placed in a temporary position—that there is frequent turnover of medical center directors, impeding the medical center's ability to engage in long-term planning and other necessary functions; and that the VA should develop a comprehensive plan to recruit permanent directors at each medical center that lacks a permanent director.

This bill requires the VA to come up with a plan to fill all of the positions that are not currently held by a permanent director. They then will report back to Congress on their progress.

Mr. Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. MILLER of Florida. Mr. Speaker, I yield 3 minutes to the gentleman from the 12th District of Illinois (Mr. BOST), the sponsor of this legislation.

Mr. BOST. Mr. Speaker, as a marine and the father of a marine, I understand it takes leadership to win a battle. However, at VA medical centers across this country, we have seen a revolving door of temporary directors that has made it difficult to implement the long-term reforms our heroes deserve. This first came to my attention in my own backyard.

Many southern Illinois veterans receive treatment at the VA Medical Center in St. Louis. This facility has struggled to find a permanent director since July 14, 2013. That is 34 months ago. It is a similar story at roughly three dozen other VA hospitals nationwide.

Part of the problem is rooted in the fact that the Office of Personnel Management only allows temporary directors to serve a term of 120 to 240 days. How are we ever going to clean up the VA if no one is around long enough to do it?

That is why I introduced H.R. 3956, the VA Health Center Management Stability and Improvement Act. My bipartisan legislation, introduced with Congressman COSTA, will help close the revolving door at the VA clinics. It requires the VA to report to Congress on any unfilled vacancies and identify roadblocks that may have led to the problem to begin with. It requires the VA to develop a plan of action for hiring highly qualified and permanent directors for each and every opening. It tells the VA to access opportunities for promoting and training high-performing candidates from within the organization.

The status quo is unacceptable, as it determines the quality, consistency, and speed of care that our veterans receive. Mr. Speaker, I urge my colleagues to join The American Legion, AMVETS, Disabled Veterans of America, and other service organizations by supporting this legislation.

Ms. BROWN of Florida. Mr. Speaker, I urge passage of H.R. 3956, as amended.

I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. MILLER of Florida. Mr. Speaker, I yield 3 minutes to the gentlewoman from the Second District of Indiana (Mrs. WALORSKI).

Mrs. WALORSKI. I thank the chairman for all his hard work on many VA issues in reference to veterans.

Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of H.R. 3956, the VA Health Center Management Stability and Improvement Act. This legislation includes my bill, the VA Scheduling Accountability Act, which locks in a crucial measure of oversight over VA scheduling practices.

Hearings held by the Veterans' Affairs Committee and investigations by the VA inspector general and the GAO have, unfortunately, substantiated many of the allegations of manipulated schedules and falsified wait time data at VA facilities across the country.

VA Directive 2010-027 contains the VA's policy for appointment scheduling processes and procedures. It contains a checklist with 19 different items, such as ensuring that a patient's desired appointment date is not altered and that the staff have appropriate training.

Importantly, the directive requires each facility to annually certify its full compliance with all 19 items. However, an August 2014 VA Office of Inspector General report uncovered that in May of 2013, a senior VA official waived the certification requirement for FY 2013. This essentially put facilities on the honor system by allowing them to only self-certify. Without this crucial accountability mechanism, bad actors were given free rein to manipulate the wait time data and allow compliance with scheduling practices to deteriorate. Meanwhile, veterans died waiting for appointments while others faced delays in getting the critical care they needed. I am glad that the VA has reinstated the certification requirement, but I am concerned there is nothing stopping them from waiving it again.

H.R. 3956, the VA Scheduling Accountability Act, requires each facility director to annually certify compliance with the scheduling directive, or any successive directive that replaces it, and, most importantly, prohibits any future waivers. In addition, it prohibits the VA from giving bonuses to directors if their facility fails to certify compliance, and it requires the VA to report to Congress a list of facilities not in compliance. This will provide more oversight of the VA, ensure Congress is aware of noncompliant facilities, and end the reckless practice of self-certification.

Mr. Speaker, I urge my colleagues to support this commonsense bill and the underlying legislation.

Mr. MILLER of Florida. Mr. Speaker, I ask my colleagues to support this important piece of legislation.

Mr. Speaker, yield back the balance of my time.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The question is on the motion offered by the gentleman from Florida (Mr. MILLER) that the House suspend the rules and pass the bill, H.R. 3956, as amended.

The question was taken; and (two-thirds being in the affirmative) the rules were suspended and the bill, as amended, was passed.

The title of the bill was amended so as to read: "A bill to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to develop and implement a plan to hire directors of the medical centers of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes."

A motion to reconsider was laid on the table.

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SERGEANT FIRST CLASS WILLIAM "KELLY" LACEY POST OFFICE

Mr. WALKER. Mr. Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and pass the bill

(H.R. 4987) to designate the facility of the United States Postal Service located at 3957 2nd Avenue in Laurel Hill, Florida, as the "Sergeant First Class William 'Kelly' Lacey Post Office".

The Clerk read the title of the bill.

The text of the bill is as follows:

H.R. 4987

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

SECTION 1. SERGEANT FIRST CLASS WILLIAM "KELLY" LACEY POST OFFICE.

(a) DESIGNATION.—The facility of the United States Postal Service located at 3957 2nd Avenue in Laurel Hill, Florida, shall be known and designated as the "Sergeant First Class William 'Kelly' Lacey Post Office".

(b) REFERENCES.—Any reference in a law, map, regulation, document, paper, or other record of the United States to the facility referred to in section 1 shall be deemed to be a reference to the "Sergeant First Class William 'Kelly' Lacey Post Office".

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the rule, the gentleman from North Carolina (Mr. WALKER) and the gentlewoman from Michigan (Mrs. LAWRENCE) each will control 20 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from North Carolina.

GENERAL LEAVE

Mr. WALKER. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members may have 5 legislative days in which to revise and extend their remarks and include extraneous material on the bill under consideration.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from North Carolina?

There was no objection.

Mr. WALKER. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

I rise today in support of H.R. 4987, introduced by Congressman JEFF MILLER of Florida.

H.R. 4987 designates the post office located at 3957 2nd Avenue in Laurel Hill, Florida, as the Sergeant First Class William "Kelly" Lacey Post Office.

Sergeant Kelly Lacey enlisted in the Army on October 16, 2002, and he served with dedication for nearly 12 years. Sergeant Lacey was on a tour of duty in Afghanistan when he was killed in action on January 4, 2014.

During his time in the Army, Sergeant Lacey earned more than 30 military awards and decorations, including a Bronze Star with Valor and two more Bronze Star Medals.

Mr. Speaker, Sergeant Lacey exemplified leadership throughout his career. Just months before his death, he fulfilled one of his lifelong dreams by reaching the rank of E-7, the same rank that his father achieved in his service.

I urge all Members to honor Lacey's great sacrifice by naming a post office in his honor. I will soon yield to the bill's sponsor, and my friend, Congressman JEFF MILLER, to tell us more about Sergeant First Class William "Kelly" Lacey.

I reserve the balance of my time.

Mrs. LAWRENCE. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to join my colleagues in the consideration of H.R. 4987, a bill to designate the facility in Laurel Hill, Florida, as the Sergeant First Class William "Kelly" Lacey Post Office.

Sergeant First Class Lacey is remembered as a wonderful family man by those he leaves behind, particularly his wife, Ashley, daughter, Lily, three stepdaughters, and parents.

Sergeant First Class Kelly's military honor includes three Bronze Stars, including one with valor, a Purple Heart, and a Humanitarian Award for his relief work following Hurricane Katrina.

We should pass this bill to remember Sergeant First Class Lacey's heroic deeds on the battlefield as well as his compassion for others at home.

I urge its passage.

I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. WALKER. Mr. Speaker, I yield 3 minutes to the gentleman from Florida (Mr. MILLER).

Mr. MILLER of Florida. Mr. Speaker, I thank my good friend, Mr. WALKER.

A little over 2 years ago, northwest Florida and our Nation lost a warrior and a patriot upon the death of Army Sergeant First Class William "Kelly" Lacey. Kelly was assigned to the 201st Brigade Support Battalion, 3rd Brigade Combat Team of the 1st Infantry Division out of Fort Knox, Kentucky, and was killed on January 4, 2014, in Nangarhar province, Afghanistan, while in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

Today I stand before you to honor this true American hero by designating the facility of the United States Postal Service, located at 3957 2nd Avenue in Laurel Hill, Florida, as the Sergeant First Class William "Kelly" Lacey Post Office.

Kelly had served three tours in Iraq and was completing his second tour in Afghanistan when his life was tragically taken. During the mission that took his life, Kelly protected fellow soldiers during an attack where a car bomb had breached his base perimeter, allowing multiple combatants, many bearing suicide vests, to initiate an assault. Kelly took a guard tower and began providing cover fire, killing three assailants before a rocket-propelled grenade took his life. He was scheduled to return home just 2 weeks from the time of his death.

We must never forget, nor take for granted, the many liberties we enjoy as Americans—liberties earned and fortified by soldiers like Kelly, who never hesitate when called upon. Kelly bravely dedicated his life to protect our freedom. While there is nothing we can do today to bring Kelly back to us and take away the pain that is felt by his loved ones that have been left behind, we can help memorialize his ultimate sacrifice.

America's sovereignty and democracy is deeply rooted in the courageous