

R.E. THOMASON FEDERAL BUILDING AND UNITED STATES COURTHOUSE

Mr. RODNEY DAVIS of Illinois. Mr. Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and pass the bill (H.R. 5873) to designate the Federal building and United States courthouse located at 511 East San Antonio Avenue in El Paso, Texas, as the "R.E. Thomason Federal Building and United States Courthouse".

The Clerk read the title of the bill.

The text of the bill is as follows:

H.R. 5873

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

SECTION 1. DESIGNATION.

The Federal building and United States courthouse located at 511 East San Antonio Avenue in El Paso, Texas, shall be known and designated as the "R.E. Thomason Federal Building and United States Courthouse".

SEC. 2. REFERENCES.

Any reference in a law, map, regulation, document, paper, or other record of the United States to the Federal building and United States courthouse referred to in section 1 shall be deemed to be a reference to the "R.E. Thomason Federal Building and United States Courthouse".

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the rule, the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. RODNEY DAVIS) and the gentleman from Indiana (Mr. CARSON) each will control 20 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from Illinois.

GENERAL LEAVE

Mr. RODNEY DAVIS of Illinois. 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 H.R. 5873.

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

There was no objection.

Mr. RODNEY DAVIS of Illinois. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Again, this is another example of bipartisanship in this great institution. H.R. 5873 would designate the Federal building and United States courthouse located at 511 East San Antonio Avenue in El Paso, Texas, as the R.E. Thomason Federal Building and United States Courthouse.

Mr. Speaker, as I notice one of my colleagues from Texas here in the Chamber, I will reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. CARSON of Indiana. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

I thank my distinguished colleague, who is willing to go beyond political boundaries to get things done for the American people.

Mr. Speaker, I also support this bill, which names the Federal building and U.S. Courthouse in El Paso, Texas, after Judge Thomason. He served as prosecutor, State legislator, mayor, even U.S. Congressman, as well as a Federal Judge.

In his career as a politician, he was known for his commitment to public works and economic development. In his second career as a Federal judge, he was acclaimed for even handling of high-profile cases and managing a considerable workload of civil and criminal cases.

I urge my colleagues to join me in advancing this legislation, which honors a great judge for his dedication to the good of the public.

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

Mr. RODNEY DAVIS of Illinois. Mr. Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. CARSON of Indiana. Mr. Speaker, I yield such time as he may consume to the gentleman from Texas (Mr. O'ROURKE).

Mr. O'ROURKE. Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague from Indiana for yielding to me and for his support of this bill. I would also like to thank my colleague from Illinois for his kind words of support in recognizing the accomplishments of Robert Ewing Thomason, referred to as "R.E." or "Ewing" by his friends in El Paso.

Judge Thomason was truly the best among us, somebody who dedicated his life to public service and to serving others, and someone who really distinguished the community that I am so honored to serve, El Paso, Texas.

He was first elected to the Texas House of Representatives in 1920 and, remarkably, for an El Pasoan and, really, for anyone in the State of Texas, in his second term only, he was elected by his fellow House members to be the Speaker of the House of Representatives in the State of Texas.

This is an accomplishment to which no other El Pasoan since has ever been able to rise. This truly was the high-water mark, at least in State politics, for an El Pasoan to reach. There he distinguished himself with his leadership and with his dedication, not just to our community, but to the State of Texas.

He then served as the mayor of El Paso, Texas, from 1927 to 1930, where he both reflected and truly guided the growth of one of the great American cities and, certainly, the greatest Southwestern city at the time. He was responsible for attracting industry, promoting local businesses, and developing the first municipal airport in El Paso, Texas.

He was then elected to the United States House of Representatives where, again, he served with distinction, rising to the level of the vice chairman of the Armed Services Committee during World War II—I would think, the period of the greatest stress and greatest demand for leadership out of that House committee—and again, he distinguished himself.

But it is truly for his service as a Federal judge for the Western District of Texas that we now remember Judge Thomason. He heard thousands of cases, presided over thousands of citizenship ceremonies.

But the case, Mr. Speaker, that I want to call to everyone's attention began in 1954, when 12 African American El Pasoans attempted to enroll in what was then known as Texas Western College, today known as the University of Texas at El Paso, part of Texas' University of Texas system.

Thelma White and 11 friends, one of whom, Mildred Parish Tutt, is the mother of our colleague, BARBARA LEE, of Oakland, California, these 12 young El Pasoans attempted to enroll at Texas Western College; and, because of the segregation clause in our State's constitution, they were barred entry.

Thelma White, who became the lead plaintiff, enlisted the support and advocacy of future Supreme Court Jurist Thurgood Marshall to promote the idea that no institution of higher learning in the State of Texas should bar anyone, including the African American students in question. That case was heard in the courtroom of Judge Thomason, and, in 1955, he enjoined the State of Texas from barring these students from entry. They were able to go to Texas Western College. It absolutely shattered the concept and practice of all-white higher education in the State of Texas. In fact, he decimated the segregation clause of our State's constitution and destroyed one of the last bastions of segregation in the former Confederacy.

How fitting that his courtroom was in the old Federal courthouse which, today, we seek to name in his honor. And even more fitting is the Tom Lea mural, one of our famous El Paso artists, the Tom Lea mural that graces this Federal courthouse, the old Federal courthouse in El Paso Texas. It has the following legend over the door: "O Pass of the North, Now the Old Giants Are Gone, We Little Men Live Where Heroes Once Walked the Inviolable Earth." A very fitting description of one of the giants that preceded us in El Paso, Texas, Judge Thomason.

Mr. RODNEY DAVIS of Illinois. Mr. Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

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

Mr. RODNEY DAVIS of Illinois. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

It is amazing to be able to come to this floor and learn historical facts about other congressional districts. In my district, I am lucky enough to represent part of Abraham Lincoln's old congressional district, so the history involved with Abraham Lincoln and what he meant to this country is something that our textbooks teach.

We come to this House floor to learn about courageous people like Judge Thomason, who served in the executive branch as mayor of El Paso, the legislative branch in the State and here, and then served in the judicial branch. To be honored, I think it is a testament, and I, once again, want to commend my colleague, Mr. O'ROURKE, for bringing this to our attention and for

allowing this honor to, hopefully, be bestowed upon that courthouse.

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

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The question is on the motion offered by the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. RODNEY DAVIS) that the House suspend the rules and pass the bill, H.R. 5873.

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

A motion to reconsider was laid on the table.

VET CONNECT ACT OF 2016

Mr. MILLER of Florida. Mr. Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and pass the bill (H.R. 5162) to amend title 38, United States Code, to authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to disclose to non-Department of Veterans Affairs health care providers certain medical records of veterans who receive health care from such providers.

The Clerk read the title of the bill.

The text of the bill is as follows:

H.R. 5162

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 “Vet Connect Act of 2016”.

SEC. 2. AUTHORITY TO DISCLOSE CERTAIN MEDICAL RECORDS OF VETERANS WHO RECEIVE NON-DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS HEALTH CARE.

Section 7332(b)(2) of title 38, United States Code, is amended by adding at the end the following new subparagraph:

“(H) To a non-Department entity (including private entities and other departments or agencies of the Federal Government) that provides hospital care or medical treatment to veterans.”.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the rule, the gentleman from Florida (Mr. MILLER) and the gentleman from California (Mr. TAKANO) 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 would have 5 legislative days within which to revise and extend their remarks or add any extraneous material.

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 today in support of H.R. 5162, the Vet Connect Act.

Ensuring that veterans receive high-quality care has been a top priority of mine and our committee, and as the access and accountability crisis of 2014 so clearly demonstrated, the Department of Veterans Affairs alone cannot provide the timely access to care that our veterans deserve.

While the passage of the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act

2 years ago has led to an increase in VA's use of community providers to treat veteran patients and linked many veterans to care they would otherwise be waiting for, the Department's struggle to adequately and consistently communicate with community partners about the veterans they are jointly caring for now has presented unnecessary challenges to VA's care in the communities' efforts.

H.R. 5162 would correct this deficiency by requiring VA to share medical record information with community providers in order to provide care or treatment to a shared patient. Mr. Speaker, this would ensure that any provider caring for a VA patient, whether in a VA medical facility or in a private sector doctor's office, has the information that they need to provide safe and quality care.

H.R. 5162 is sponsored by my friend and colleague and fellow committee member, Congressman BETO O'ROURKE from Texas. I am grateful to him for his efforts and his leadership in sponsoring this important legislation.

This bill is supported by the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, and the Vietnam Veterans of America, and I urge all of my colleagues to join me in supporting it as well.

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

Mr. TAKANO. Mr. Speaker I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Mr. Speaker, I rise today in strong support of H.R. 5162, the Vet Connect Act of 2016. The bill is sponsored by my friend and classmate, Congressman BETO O'ROURKE.

In 2014, when Congress passed the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act, we created a program called Choice, to make access to care easier for veterans who were unable to get an appointment at their local VA medical center. These veterans have now been able to get care closer to their home with the provider of their choice.

However, current law prevented the community providers from getting records from the VA regarding the previous care veterans had received. This bill gives the VA authority to disclose certain medical records of veterans who receive non-VA care to community providers.

Essentially, this would allow the VA to share health information with the veteran's non-VA doctor without having HIPAA implications. Current treatments are already covered under HIPAA, and this bill would allow previous treatments to be disclosed, thereby improving the continuity of care.

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I commend my colleague from Texas for being a leader in ensuring safe, quality health care for veterans. He has been a champion for veterans in El Paso and has turned the concerns that he has heard from his constituents into thoughtful legislation that helps veterans across our country.

Mr. Speaker, I strongly support this legislation and urge my colleagues to support this bill as well.

Mr. Speaker, I yield 5 minutes to the gentleman from Texas (Mr. O'ROURKE), the author of this bill.

Mr. O'ROURKE. Mr. Speaker, I would also like to thank my colleague, the ranking member, Mr. TAKANO from California, for his support and his work on the committee and not just promoting commonsense bills like these, but working across the aisle with colleagues on both sides to ensure that we move the concerns and the cares of veterans in this country forward. His leadership at this critical time is so important, and I am grateful for it.

I would also like to thank the chairman of our committee, Mr. MILLER from Florida, for his leadership in really ensuring that the House Veterans' Affairs Committee remains one of the most important and perhaps one of the last refuges for bipartisanship in Congress. It is really through his leadership—and I have been lucky enough to serve with him now almost 4 years—that we have been able to do some really outstanding things for veterans in this country. I know that he would be the first to agree that we are not there yet. There is no “mission accomplished” banner that hangs behind us, but we have made extraordinary progress under his guidance and his willingness to work with Members from both sides of the aisle—all Members of the committee—and I am truly grateful for his support of this bill.

I should also note, Mr. Speaker, that this bill is cosponsored by Dr. BENISHEK from Michigan, a stout defender of veterans and, from his medical background, someone who is uniquely capable of informing important legislation like this one.

As both of the previous speakers have stated, this ensures that we connect veterans in our communities, the places that we represent, with the care that they have earned and that they deserve. In the VA today, we have an acknowledged shortage of 43,000 clinical positions. We have to acknowledge that we will not be able to see every single veteran in the instances when they most need care with current capacity within the VA. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to ensure that we leverage the capacity of the doctors, nurses, and providers in the communities that we represent to the best of our ability. Critical to that is health information exchange records sharing so that the doctors in the community know what they need to know about the veteran they are about to see so they deliver the best, most informed care that they can possibly deliver, and that we get the best outcomes for these veterans.

This bill ensures that we share medical information effectively, privately, conforming to HIPAA, maintaining the veteran's privacy, and yet effectively ensure that that veteran gets the care that they have earned, that they need,