

managing health, and it is not just a database. As Dr. DUNN knows well, these are important diagnostic tools and they have to be right.

But the thing that every veteran for 20 years was saying was: Why do we have one medical record in the Department of Defense, so when we leave the Army, the Navy, the Marines, or the Air Force, we drop off a cliff—we all carry around a paper file they print out to us—and then we try to get back into the VA and it is an entirely different system that doesn't talk to one another?

It seems pretty self-evident that from the time you raise your hand until the time you are buried with honors, it would make sense that we had a joint electronic medical record. That was the genesis of this.

I am proud to say that it was a long road, but we had the signing of the Cerner contract.

What this piece of legislation does is—and I want to be very careful about—we do this many times here, we pass a piece of legislation, pat ourselves on the back, and send it away, only to watch it die a horrible death in the executive branch, not be implemented correctly, or not provide our oversight.

This simply says—and Dr. DUNN was exactly right—this is a \$16 billion 10-year project. I want to be clear, though: that is our current projection.

Everyone in here knows that if we get a 10 percent delay and a 10 percent cost overrun, we will probably be relatively happy with that. That is over a year, and it will be a nearly \$2 billion addition. That money will have to come from somewhere. It will slow down implementation. We saw reports early last week that there were serious concerns in the pilot program that are out there.

So what this does—and I, once again, thank the chairman and the majority staff for recognizing this is our responsibility. We will not shirk that here—it asks them to report to us. It let's us stay on top of this before it becomes a crisis. Because every single one of us here knows that it is coming some day—that we are going to hear about misinformation, something dropping through, a cost overrun—and this just gives us that added security.

This is a project that cannot fail. I have witnessed in my time in Congress too many IT failures, specifically at the VA: a contract is signed, it is going to happen, and it is a good thing. It has the potential to, as again the gentleman said, revolutionize how we deliver care. But it has the potential to go in the wrong direction if we are not doing our constitutional right of oversight.

Mr. Speaker, I urge my colleagues to support this piece of legislation.

Mr. Speaker, I think this is, once again, the legislative branch, as it was meant to be, taking back its oversight responsibility. We are going to authorize this and we are going to appropriate

the funds. I think it is only prudent that we have another layer of oversight to make sure that this huge, huge project, nearly unprecedented, upgrade in integration of electronic health records of anywhere in the world, happens correctly.

Mr. Speaker, I encourage a “yes” vote on this, and I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. DUNN. Mr. Speaker, once again, I encourage all Members to support H.R. 4245, and I yield back the balance of my time.

Ms. JACKSON LEE. Mr. Speaker, I rise in strong support of H.R. 4245, the Veterans' Electronic Health Record Modernization Oversight Act of 2017.

Mr. Speaker, one way the nation can express its deepest appreciation for our service men and women is to ensure that their health records are handled appropriately.

H.R. 4245 directs the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to submit certain documents to Congress relating to the Electronic Health Record Modernization Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

More than 20 million brave Americans are veterans of our nation's armed services including more than 1.5 million women, 2.4 million African American men and women, 1.4 million Hispanic men and women, 320,000 Asian Americans, and 145,000 American Indians.

Of these veterans, more than 1.4 million reside in my home state of Texas.

Harris County, the county which contains my home district, has over 187,000 veterans which is the largest veteran population of any county in Texas.

More than 9 million veterans and their families are enrolled in the VA health care system, making it the largest health care system in the nation.

This system employs more than 306,000 full time health care professionals and support staff at 1,240 health care facilities, including 170 VA Medical Centers and 1,061 outpatient sites.

Mr. Speaker, our veterans bravely put their lives on the line to defend our freedoms and to keep our nation safe.

By passing H.R. 4245, the modernization of veterans' health records will receive the attention it deserves in order to enhance their rehabilitation and quality of life.

The Veterans' Electronic Health Record Modernization Oversight Act of 2017 requires the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to submit documentation to Congress regarding the agency's efforts to modernize its health record system.

This will serve as a vital resource to enable us to assist our veterans as they overcome burdensome health problems.

I urge my colleagues to join me in supporting H.R. 4245 to show their support and gratitude for the sacrifices made by our service men and women, and to ensure that veterans receive the care and rehabilitation they deserve.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The question is on the motion offered by the gentleman from Florida (Mr. DUNN) that the House suspend the rules and pass the bill, H.R. 4245.

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.

SERVICEMEMBERS IMPROVED TRANSITION THROUGH REFORMS FOR ENSURING PROGRESS ACT

Mr. DUNN. Mr. Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and pass the bill (H.R. 4830) to amend title 38, United States Code, to provide for the disapproval of any course of education for purposes of the educational assistance programs of the Department of Veterans Affairs unless the educational institution providing the course permits individuals to attend or participate in courses pending payment by Department, and for other purposes, as amended.

The Clerk read the title of the bill.

The text of the bill is as follows:

H.R. 4830

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 “Servicemembers Improved Transition through Reforms for Ensuring Progress Act” or the “SIT-REP Act”.

SEC. 2. DISAPPROVAL FOR PURPOSES OF EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS OF DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS OF CERTAIN COURSES OF EDUCATION THAT DO NOT PERMIT INDIVIDUALS TO ATTEND OR PARTICIPATE IN COURSES PENDING PAYMENT.

Section 3679 of title 38, United States Code, is amended by adding at the end the following new subsection:

“(e)(1) Notwithstanding any other provision of this chapter, beginning on August 1, 2018, a State approving agency, or the Secretary when acting in the role of the State approving agency, shall disapprove a course of education provided by an educational institution unless the educational institution has adopted the following policies:

“(A) A policy that permits any covered individual to attend or participate in the course of education during the period beginning on the date on which the individual provides to the educational institution a certificate of eligibility for entitlement to educational assistance under chapter 31 or 33 of this title and ending on the earlier of the following dates:

“(i) The date on which the Secretary provides payment for such course of education to such institution.

“(ii) The date that is 90 days after the date on which the individual provides to the educational institution such certificate of eligibility.

“(B) A policy that ensures that the educational institution will not impose any penalty, including the assessment of late fees, the denial of access to classes, libraries, or other institutional facilities, or the requirement that a covered individual borrow additional funds, on any covered individual because of the individual's inability to meet his or her financial obligations to the institution as a result of the delayed disbursement of any payment to be provided by the Secretary.

“(2) For purposes of this subsection, a covered individual is any individual who is entitled to educational assistance under chapter 31 or 33 of this title.

“(3) The Secretary may waive such requirements of paragraph (1) as the Secretary considers appropriate.”.

SEC. 3. CLARIFICATION REGARDING APPLICABILITY OF AUTHORITY TO USE EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANCE TO PURSUE INDEPENDENT STUDY PROGRAMS AT CERTAIN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS THAT ARE NOT INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING.

The section heading for section 302 of the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017 (Public Law 115-48) is amended to read as follows (and the table of contents for such Act is conformed accordingly):

“SEC. 302. AUTHORIZATION FOR USE OF EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANCE UNDER ANY OF THE EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS TO PURSUE INDEPENDENT STUDY PROGRAMS AT CERTAIN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS THAT ARE NOT INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING.”

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the rule, the gentleman from Florida (Mr. DUNN) and the gentleman from Minnesota (Mr. WALZ) each will control 20 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from Florida.

GENERAL LEAVE

Mr. DUNN. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members have 5 legislative days in which to revise and extend their remarks and insert extraneous material into the RECORD on H.R. 4830, as amended.

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

There was no objection.

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

Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of H.R. 4830, as amended, the SIT-REP Act, the Servicemembers Improved Transition through Reforms for Ensuring Progress Act.

Mr. Speaker, the Post-9/11 GI Bill provides generous education benefits, including a monthly living stipend to veterans and eligible dependents. In order for a student to utilize this benefit, they must provide a certificate of eligibility to the school or training program and then the institution certifies the student's attendance to the Department of Veterans Affairs. After this process, the school receives tuition payment and the veteran receives their monthly housing allowance.

Mr. Speaker, if all goes well, those claims are supposed to be processed within 12 to 14 days for original claims, and between 6 to 8 days for supplemental claims. However, there are times when delays do occur, and they can have a significant impact on a school's and a student's bottom line. These delays typically occur at the beginning of a semester, or when a school doesn't do their part to certify a student's attendance quickly.

Mr. Speaker, we have been told that some schools and training programs have, essentially, taken these delays out on their student veterans, dependents and surviving spouses by placing students on payment plans, blocking access to school facilities; and, in some cases, have been barring students from registering for classes.

Mr. Speaker, I believe these practices are incredibly unfair, as students

should not be held accountable for bureaucratic delays and hiccups that are outside their control. I am pleased that H.R. 4830, as amended, would address this issue and say that in order for schools and training programs to be eligible for the GI Bill, they must adopt a policy that doesn't punish students in any way for delays in tuition fees and payments that are not their fault.

Mr. Speaker, I thank Vice Chairman BILIRAKIS and the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, TAPS, a great organization that helps survivors of all ages deal with loss, for bringing this important bill forward.

Mr. Speaker, I urge my colleagues to support H.R. 4830, as amended, and I reserve the balance of my time.

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

Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman from Florida for, once again, bringing up a really important piece of legislation. I believe the gentleman is also the longest serving member of the Veterans' Affairs Committee. Any piece of important legislation over the last decade-plus has had his hand in it.

H.R. 4830, as amended, is a bill that we have worked on in a bipartisan basis with TAPS, the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors. TAPS came to the committee and to Mr. BILIRAKIS, after they heard from many surviving spouses that with all of the changes that were being implemented on August 1, there will be delayed payments and processing times for payments for veterans and survivors enrolled for the fall 2018 semester.

□ 1545

The Forever GI Bill that we are all in this body proud of passing and proud of updating contains several large-scale changes the VA is currently working very hard to implement. Some of those changes went into effect in the fall of 2017, and TAPS reported to the committee that, because of delays in VA payments, many schools demanded payment from students.

There were stories of students who were not allowed to attend class, register for classes, or use campus facilities only because the VA payment was delayed. In some cases, students were even put on a payment plan they could not afford or forced to take out student loans with egregious orientation fees in order to continue their education.

This bill will provide students receiving VA payments with the same protections as those who receive title IV funding, such as Pell Grants and Federal student loans. These title IV students are allowed to attend classes, participate in extracurricular activities, and use campus facilities as long as their school knows payment is forthcoming.

Mr. Speaker, H.R. 4830, as amended, will give the Secretary of Veterans Affairs the ability to disapprove any course of education unless the educational institution providing the course permits individuals to attend or

participate in courses pending payment by the VA and accept a certificate of eligibility as a promise. As such, the bill will serve as a preventive measure to discourage schools from engaging in shutting out VA beneficiaries simply because of an administrative delay. This is a really good step toward ensuring that our student veterans and other GI Bill beneficiaries are not unnecessarily prevented from getting the most of their benefits due.

To be very clear about this, there are very few benefits that are really earned in the way a GI Bill benefit is earned. Those of us who have used the GI Bill to get an education know how important it is.

Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman for continuing to show care for these veterans. This is a great, smart piece of legislation. I encourage its adoption.

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

Mr. DUNN. Mr. Speaker, I yield 4 minutes to the gentleman from Florida (Mr. BILIRAKIS), the vice chairman of the committee.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Mr. Speaker, I thank Mr. DUNN, my fellow Floridian, a great Member of Congress, and also my good friend Mr. WALZ, who has done an outstanding job over the years supporting our veterans. I also thank Mr. WALZ for his service.

Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of my bill, H.R. 4830, the Servicemembers Improved Transition through Reforms for Ensuring Progress Act, or the SIT-REP Act, which will hold student veterans harmless from bureaucratic red tape and delays at higher education institutions at the VA.

I am proud of the work my colleagues and I conducted on the Veterans' Affairs Committee last year to pass the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Education Assistance Act, or the Forever GI Bill. This historic legislation expanded access to education and improves and modernizes the GI Bill for our veterans.

This is one of the reasons, Mr. Speaker, we came to Congress: to do something like this, to help our veterans get their education.

In our committee hearings on implementation of the Forever GI Bill, we heard concerns about the delays in processing of tuition payments between the schools and the VA. I also had roundtables in my district with veterans, and this was a concern of theirs.

So while the average timelines for processing these benefits are 25 days for new claims and 9 days for supplemental claims, oftentimes the processing timelines spike higher at the beginning of each school year upon a surge in claims.

We heard concerns from our VSO stakeholders—I thank them—regarding delayed payments resulting from either slow VA processing or a mistake or tardiness by the school certifying official. In some cases, the delays meant schools putting a hold on a student's

account or forcing the student to begin payment of tuition and fees on a payment plan until they received money from VA.

My bill, the SIT-REP Act, would give the Secretary the authority to disapprove courses of education for the GI Bill unless the educational institution adopts a policy ensuring that it will not impose a fee on the veteran or deny the veteran's access to education. This policy would be applied for the first 90 days of the school term.

The SIT-REP Act is a commonsense bill that protects student veterans and their families who, through no fault of their own, are denied access to education because the school made a mistake or the VA made a late payment. It is not the veteran's fault, and they should not be punished for the actions of others.

Mr. Speaker, I urge all my colleagues to join me in support of my practical and bipartisan legislation, which will help ensure our student veterans have full access to the educational benefits they have earned and deserve. I hope that the Senate takes up this bill quickly.

Again, I urge passage of this great bill. We have got to get it to the President's desk as soon as possible.

Mr. Speaker, I thank the committee staff as well. They did a great job on this bill.

Mr. WALZ. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman from Florida for his great work on this. I encourage its passage.

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

Mr. DUNN. Mr. Speaker, once again, I encourage all Members to support H.R. 4830, as amended, and I yield back the balance of my time.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The question is on the motion offered by the gentleman from Florida (Mr. DUNN) that the House suspend the rules and pass the bill, H.R. 4830, as amended.

The question was taken.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. In the opinion of the Chair, two-thirds being in the affirmative, the ayes have it.

Mr. DUNN. Mr. Speaker, on that I demand the yeas and nays.

The yeas and nays were ordered.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to clause 8 of rule XX, further proceedings on this motion will be postponed.

VETERANS AFFAIRS PURCHASE CARD MISUSE MITIGATION ACT

Mr. ROE of Tennessee. Mr. Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and pass the bill (H.R. 5215) to amend title 38, United States Code, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to prohibit employees found to have knowingly misused Department of Veterans Affairs purchase cards from serving as purchase card holders or approving officials.

The Clerk read the title of the bill.

The text of the bill is as follows:

H.R. 5215

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 "Veterans Affairs Purchase Card Misuse Mitigation Act".

SEC. 2. MISUSE OF DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS PURCHASE CARDS BY DEPARTMENT EMPLOYEES.

(a) IN GENERAL.—Chapter 7 of title 38, United States Code, is amended by adding at the end the following new section:

"§ 727. Misuse of Department purchase cards

"(a) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary shall prohibit any employee of the Department who the Secretary or the Inspector General of the Department determines has knowingly misused a purchase card from serving as a purchase card holder or approving official. Such a prohibition shall be in addition to any other applicable penalty.

"(b) MISUSE.—For purposes of this section, the term 'misuse' means—

- "(1) splitting purchases;
- "(2) exceeding applicable purchase card limits or purchase thresholds;
- "(3) purchasing any unauthorized item;
- "(4) using a purchase card without being an authorized purchase card holder; or
- "(5) violating ethics standards."

(b) CLERICAL AMENDMENT.—The table of sections at the beginning of such chapter is amended by inserting after the item relating to section 725 the following new item:

"727. Misuse of Department purchase cards."

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the rule, the gentleman from Tennessee (Mr. ROE) and the gentleman from Minnesota (Mr. WALZ) each will control 20 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from Tennessee.

GENERAL LEAVE

Mr. ROE of Tennessee. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members have 5 legislative days in which to revise and extend their remarks and insert extraneous material into the record on H.R. 5215.

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

There was no objection.

Mr. ROE of Tennessee. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself as much time as I may consume.

Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of H.R. 5215, the Veterans Affairs Purchase Card Misuse Mitigation Act.

This legislation is sponsored by my Veterans' Affairs Committee colleagues JACK BERGMAN, KATHLEEN RICE, MIKE BOST, Dr. NEAL DUNN, and MIKE COFFMAN.

H.R. 5215 would implement an additional safeguard in VA's multibillion-dollar government purchase card program, which has too often lacked adequate controls and has periodically been abused. The legislation directs the Secretary to revoke the purchase card from any employee who is found to have intentionally misused it.

Mr. Speaker, I urge my colleagues to support H.R. 5215, and I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. WALZ. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself as much time as I may consume.

Mr. Speaker, I rise in support of H.R. 5215, the Veterans Affairs Purchase Card Mitigation Act.

I have often said I am the VA's staunchest supporter, but I will be their harshest critic. On this one, I will be their harshest critic.

Time and again when we hear reports of VA employees misusing purchase cards, that cannot stand. Every dollar that is misused, whether it is through fraud, waste, or abuse, is one less dollar that is not being used towards veterans, and it is the taxpayers' dollars that need to be guarded. This misuse erodes Congress' ability to oversee the VA budget and the use of the money.

Employees who misuse purchase cards should be held accountable and should be prevented from being a purchase card holder or authorizing official, because they can't be trusted to follow the regulations or be good stewards of taxpayer dollars.

This legislation will ensure that taxpayer dollars are protected from purchase card misuse. If you are doing it right, you can still use the card and it can serve veterans. If you choose to ignore the rules, you are not going to be able to do it anymore.

It is pretty simple. It is a smart piece of legislation. I urge its passage.

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

Mr. ROE of Tennessee. Mr. Speaker, I yield 3 minutes to the gentleman from Michigan (Mr. BERGMAN), our Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee chair.

Mr. BERGMAN. Mr. Speaker, government purchase cards are issued to Federal employees to make small, simple purchases. Their transaction limit was \$3,500, but the fiscal year 2018 NDAA increased that limit to \$10,000. This increase will cause purchase card usage to go up, thereby increasing the chance for misuse.

Purchase card transactions already total roughly \$4 billion annually in the VA, and the program has been found repeatedly to lack adequate controls related to waste, fraud, and abuse.

As chairman of the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, it is my job to monitor programs involving taxpayer dollars and veterans. That is why I introduced the Veterans Affairs Purchase Card Misuse Mitigation Act. It will mitigate the potential for misuse of purchase card spending by requiring the VA Secretary to revoke a purchase card from any employee found to have knowingly misused their card or approval authority.

Currently, penalties are applied slowly, if at all, and employees are very rarely terminated for purchase card misuse or abuse. H.R. 5215 creates a safeguard to stop purchase card misuse once it begins and holds bad actors accountable for all of their actions.

Mr. Speaker, being a good steward of taxpayers' dollars is my top priority, and this bill brings accountability to the necessary but problematic purchase card structure.

Mr. Speaker, I urge support of this bill.

Mr. WALZ. Mr. Speaker, may I inquire of the gentleman whether he has any further speakers.