

In keeping with the traditions of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, this bill was introduced by Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs Subcommittee Chair ELAINE LURIA and Ranking Member MIKE BOST. I appreciate their commitment to ensuring that veterans and their families can afford living expenses when prices go up.

H.R. 1200 authorizes a cost-of-living increase for veterans and their families next year if Social Security recipients receive an increase.

To put this in perspective, in 1975, a veteran who was rated totally disabled would receive at least \$655 in monthly disability compensation. Because of the COLAs that Congress has passed for decades, totally disabled veterans now receive \$2,907 in tax-free monthly disability compensation, an increase of 443 percent over the years. As you can see, H.R. 1200 is necessary to prevent inflation from eroding the value of veteran and survivor benefits.

Madam Speaker, I encourage all Members to support H.R. 1200, and I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. TAKANO. Madam Speaker, I yield 3 minutes to the gentlewoman from Virginia (Mrs. LURIA), who is my good friend and the chairwoman of the Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs Subcommittee and also a cosponsor of H.R. 1200.

Mrs. LURIA. Madam Speaker, I rise today in support of my bipartisan bill, H.R. 1200, the Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2019.

In Congress, I have vowed to keep our Nation's veterans at the top of my mind, and I plan to deliver on that promise through this critical piece of legislation.

I represent a coastal Virginia district with eight major military installations, including Naval Station Norfolk, the largest naval station in the United States, so veterans are clearly a critical part of my constituency, just as they are honored members of every congressional district across America.

Our veterans put their lives on the line and are deployed far from home to keep America safe. As a 20-year Navy veteran myself, I am proud to bring a bill to the floor that would eliminate the erosions of benefits they earned in service to our country.

The Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act would recognize that the benefits we provide our veterans need to be modernized and increased the same way that Social Security has raised benefits to meet cost-of-living increases.

□ 1645

My bill enhances benefits for wartime disability compensation, compensation for dependents, clothing allowance, dependency and indemnity compensation to surviving spouses, and dependency and indemnity compensation to children.

We have seen costs for disability care, clothing, and childcare increase over the years, and it is vital that we

continue to provide benefits that actually meet the demands that our veterans see on the ground.

A cost-of-living increase would aid veterans, their families, and their survivors to help maintain the value of their benefits against inflation. Without consistent increases, veterans and their families may not be able to have a consistent quality of life into their later years.

Providing quality benefits to our veterans and their dependents can change lives, and Congress must honor the commitment to those American heroes who served in harm's way so that we can live in peace at home.

I thank my colleagues on the Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs Subcommittee and my ranking member, MIKE BOST, for being a cosponsor of this legislation, and I urge swift House passage so that we can do our part to push this into law and help our Nation's veterans.

Mr. DAVID P. ROE of Tennessee. Madam Speaker, I yield 2 minutes to the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. BOST), ranking member of the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs and a marine veteran.

Mr. BOST. Madam Speaker, this is a must-pass bill.

I want to thank the chairman and the ranking member for moving this piece of legislation forward as well.

Many disabled veterans and their families depend on their veterans benefits to pay for things like food and medicine. For many of these veterans, these payments are a lifeline. In some cases, the benefits may even be the only income that the veteran has.

It is only fair that we ensure that the benefits paid to veterans who were injured during military service do not lose value because of inflation. If we don't, it could become hard for people who were injured while serving our Nation in uniform to keep their heads above water.

I want to thank Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs Subcommittee Chair LURIA for her introduction of the bill.

Madam Speaker, this bill has always enjoyed bipartisan support. I urge my colleagues to support H.R. 1200.

Mr. DAVID P. ROE of Tennessee. Madam Speaker, I have no further speakers, and I am prepared to close.

Madam Speaker, I encourage everyone to support this commonsense bill.

I think my last duty assignment was probably in Mrs. LURIA's district, Fort Eustis, Virginia. That is where my last 9 months in the Army was.

I was raised in a military town: Fort Campbell, Kentucky, and Clarksville, Tennessee. I grew up around the military, and I just cannot thank them enough.

This is the very least we can do for our disabled veterans, to give them a COLA which will, hopefully, make their lives a little bit better and thank them for their service.

Madam Speaker, I encourage all Members to support this legislation,

and I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. TAKANO. Madam Speaker, I, too, join my ranking member in asking all of our colleagues to pass H.R. 1200.

I thank Chairwoman LURIA and Ranking Member BOST of the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs for their hard work.

Madam Speaker, I urge my colleagues to support H.R. 1200, and I yield back the balance of my time.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The question is on the motion offered by the gentleman from California (Mr. TAKANO) that the House suspend the rules and pass the bill, H.R. 1200.

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.

VETERANS' CARE QUALITY TRANSPARENCY ACT

Mr. TAKANO. Madam Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and pass the bill (H.R. 2372) to direct the Comptroller General of the United States to conduct an assessment of all memoranda of understanding and memoranda of agreement between Under Secretary of Health and non-Department of Veterans Affairs entities relating to suicide prevention and mental health services, as amended.

The Clerk read the title of the bill.

The text of the bill is as follows:

H.R. 2372

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' Care Quality Transparency Act".

SEC. 2. COMPTROLLER GENERAL ASSESSMENT OF MEMORANDA OF UNDERSTANDING AND MEMORANDA OF AGREEMENT BETWEEN UNDER SECRETARY OF HEALTH AND NON-DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS ENTITIES RELATING TO SUICIDE PREVENTION AND MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES.

(a) ASSESSMENT.—Not later than 270 days after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Comptroller General of the United States shall conduct an assessment of the effectiveness of all memoranda of understanding and memoranda of agreement entered into by the Under Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Health and a non-Department of Veterans Affairs entity relating to—

(1) suicide prevention activities and outreach; and

(2) the provision or coordination of mental health services during the five-year period preceding the date of the enactment of this Act.

(b) CONTENTS OF ASSESSMENT.—The assessment required by subsection (a) shall include an assessment of—

(1) the size of the catchment area of each such entity;

(2) the staffing structures of such entities;

(3) any accreditation or licensure any such entity has obtained in relation to the services the entity provides;

(4) any variances in the subpopulations of veterans served by such entities;

(5) any limitations any such entity may face in carrying out its obligations under the memorandum of understanding or memorandum of agreement;

(6) the extent to which the Under Secretary provides oversight and tracks outcomes of such entities;

(7) any variations in the structure or requirements of the memoranda of understanding and memoranda of agreement;

(8) a breakdown of the percentage of such entities that serve—

(A) women veterans;

(B) minority veterans;

(C) veterans who are over the age of 55;

(D) veterans between the ages of 18 and 34;

(E) veterans who reside in United States insular areas; and

(F) veterans' families; and

(9) any measures taken to ensure the secure exchange of data and information between such entities and the Department of Veterans Affairs.

(c) REPORT TO CONGRESS.—Not later than 270 days after the completion of the assessment under subsection (a), the Comptroller General shall submit to the Committees on Veterans' Affairs of the Senate and House of Representatives a report on the results of the assessment.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the rule, the gentleman from California (Mr. TAKANO) and the gentleman from Tennessee (Mr. DAVID P. ROE) each will control 20 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from California.

GENERAL LEAVE

Mr. TAKANO. Madam 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. 2372, as amended.

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

There was no objection.

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

Madam Speaker, to meet the needs of veterans, VA has long relied on community partners to provide outreach and services, particularly to address mental health needs and suicide prevention.

The number of mental health- and suicide prevention-related agreements between VA and these organizations has increased exponentially since 2014. It is anticipated that these relationships will continue to grow in the months following the signing of Executive Order No. 13861 on March 5, 2019.

Now, this executive order seeks to establish grants to local communities to better collaborate and integrate service delivery and resources for veterans. As reliance on outside groups grows, Congress must better understand the effectiveness of the programs and mental health services these private organizations offer. VA must also ensure such partnered organizations are able to provide quality, culturally competent, evidence-based services to veterans.

Congresswoman UNDERWOOD's legislation, H.R. 2372, as amended, would require the Government Accountability Office to study the effectiveness of these partnerships between VA and organizations providing services related to suicide prevention and mental healthcare.

When complete, GAO would report their findings to the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees. As part of the assessment, GAO is required to look at several factors, such as the staffing structure of the organization, its accreditations or licensures, the level of oversight and tracking of outcomes by VA, and the secure exchange of data and information.

The GAO would also be required to study the ability of these organizations to serve unique subsets of the veteran population, including, women, minorities, older and younger veteran cohorts, families, and veterans who reside in U.S. insular areas.

I thank Ms. UNDERWOOD for introducing this legislation because it will ensure VA is responsibly leveraging its community partnerships to reduce veteran suicide and support VA in its transformation to a public health approach to suicide prevention. This public health approach focuses on prevention and intervention before veterans are in crisis.

As I previously mentioned, a two-pronged strategy is necessary to address the national crisis of veteran suicide. These Federal, State, and local partnerships are integral to the first prong of the strategy of prevention and early intervention.

It is critical that we develop these partnerships as part of an infrastructure to support veterans. This legislation will ensure we are using taxpayer funds effectively to partner with those organizations providing quality, evidence-based programs.

Madam Speaker, I am proud to support this legislation, and I encourage all my colleagues to vote "yes" on H.R. 2372, as amended.

Madam Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. DAVID P. ROE of Tennessee. Madam Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Madam Speaker, I rise today in support of H.R. 2372, as amended, the Veterans' Care Quality Transparency Act.

This bill is sponsored by Congresswoman LAUREN UNDERWOOD of Illinois, and I thank her for her efforts to bring it to the House floor today.

This bill would require the Government Accountability Office to conduct an assessment of the effectiveness of all memoranda of understanding and memoranda of agreement entered into by the Department of Veterans Affairs and other governmental or private-sector entities regarding suicide prevention activities and outreach, as well as the coordination of mental health services, during the 5-year period preceding the date of enactment.

For the last two decades, approximately 20 of our Nation's servicemembers and veterans have died by suicide on a daily basis.

Suicide is, unquestionably, a tragedy that impacts all Americans and is a crisis that VA cannot combat alone. In light of that, VA has become increasingly mindful of the need to collabo-

rate with partners in both the public and private sectors to connect with servicemembers, veterans, and their families wherever they reside and with whatever they may be struggling.

This bill would ensure that Congress has insight into those collaborations and whether or not they are working as intended to reduce incidents of suicide among those who have served our country.

Madam Speaker, I encourage all Members to support this bill today, and I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. TAKANO. Madam Speaker, I yield 3 minutes to the gentlewoman from Illinois (Ms. UNDERWOOD), my good friend, member of the Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs Subcommittee, and author of H.R. 2372.

Ms. UNDERWOOD. Madam Speaker, I rise today in support of my bill, the Veterans' Care Quality Transparency Act.

With Memorial Day just around the corner, I am humbled to see these bipartisan efforts to bring forward legislation that will help all veterans receive the care that they have earned through their service to our Nation.

I am so pleased to see the chairman's focus on ensuring access to healthcare for veterans, particularly women veterans, who face unique challenges navigating a VA system originally designed to serve men.

I am committed to working to make needed improvements to the VA by working with my colleagues on the Servicewomen and Women Veterans Congressional Caucus and on the Women Veterans Task Force.

I am also pleased to see this bipartisan, wide-ranging focus on veterans' mental health and suicide prevention.

Our work, however, has just begun. We have an urgent responsibility to continue to fight for the highest standards of care on behalf of veterans.

Despite much good work by the VA and significant Federal investment, the veteran suicide rate hasn't gone down. We must empower the VA to find innovative, effective ways to end this crisis. That is why I have introduced this bill, which will address a vital but overlooked part of veteran suicide prevention.

The bill directs the GAO to evaluate the effectiveness of agreements that the Department of Veterans Affairs has with outside providers for mental healthcare and suicide prevention services.

Expanding access to care for veterans struggling with mental health or with thoughts of suicide is an essential part of reducing veteran suicide rates, and partnering with providers outside the VA is just one way to do that. But there just isn't enough data on the ability of these outside providers to meet the high standards of care we expect from the VA.

All veterans deserve access to convenient and high-quality healthcare, and it is unacceptable that outside providers are not currently held to the same high standards as the VA.

The mission of the VA is undermined each time a veteran receives substandard care. My bill would help ensure outside providers are held to the standard of providing high-quality mental healthcare and suicide prevention services.

Our efforts to stop veteran suicide need to focus on wider, better informed, and data-driven paths to tangible results so that we can save lives. This bill is about increasing transparency so that we can ensure that those who have served our Nation are not left behind when they return home.

I am grateful to my colleagues on the Committee on Veterans' Affairs who have reaffirmed their commitment to this issue and who have acted so quickly to respond to the veteran suicide crisis with the focus and resources it deserves.

Madam Speaker, I urge my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to support this bill.

Mr. DAVID P. ROE of Tennessee. Madam Speaker, I have no further speakers, and I am prepared to close.

Madam Speaker, I want to thank Congresswoman UNDERWOOD for submitting this legislation today. I think it is much needed. I have thought it all along. Let's find out what works and what doesn't work. I appreciate her doing this, and I feel like it will be supported by the entire body.

I encourage all Members of the body to support this legislation, and I yield back the balance of my time.

□ 1700

Mr. TAKANO. Madam Speaker, I yield myself the balance of my time.

I want to thank Congresswoman UNDERWOOD for introducing H.R. 2372, and the tremendous, tremendous professional background she brings to her role in Congress, and for introducing legislation that will ensure that we hold private organizations to the same standard of care that we impose internally on the VA.

So I do urge all of my colleagues to join me in passing H.R. 2372, as amended.

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

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The question is on the motion offered by the gentleman from California (Mr. TAKANO) that the House suspend the rules and pass the bill, H.R. 2372, 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.

ESTABLISHING VETERANS ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY AND TRANSITION ADMINISTRATION

Mr. TAKANO. Mr. Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and pass the bill (H.R. 2045) to amend title 38, United States Code, to establish the Veterans

Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration and the Under Secretary for Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes, as amended.

The Clerk read the title of the bill.

The text of the bill is as follows:

H.R. 2045

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

SECTION 1. ESTABLISHMENT OF VETERANS ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY AND TRANSITION ADMINISTRATION.

(a) VETERANS ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY AND TRANSITION ADMINISTRATION.—

(1) IN GENERAL.—Part V of title 38, United States Code, is amended by adding at the end the following new chapter:

“CHAPTER 80—VETERANS ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY AND TRANSITION ADMINISTRATION

“Sec.

“8001. Organization of Administration.

“8002. Functions of Administration.

“8003. Annual report to Congress.

“§8001. Organization of Administration

“(a) VETERANS ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY AND TRANSITION ADMINISTRATION.—There is in the Department of Veterans Affairs a Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration. The primary function of the Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration is the administration of the programs of the Department that provide assistance related to economic opportunity to veterans and their dependents and survivors.

“(b) UNDER SECRETARY FOR ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY AND TRANSITION.—The Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration is under the Under Secretary for Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition, who is directly responsible to the Secretary for the operations of the Administration.

“§8002. Functions of Administration

“The Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration is responsible for the administration of the following programs of the Department:

“(1) Vocational rehabilitation and employment programs.

“(2) Educational assistance programs.

“(3) Veterans' housing loan and related programs.

“(4) The verification of small businesses owned and controlled by veterans pursuant to subsection (f) of section 8127 of this title, including the administration of the database of veteran-owned businesses described in such subsection.

“(5) The Transition Assistance Program under section 1144 of title 10.

“(6) Any other program of the Department that the Secretary determines appropriate.

“§8003. Annual report to Congress

“The Secretary shall include in the annual report to the Congress required by section 529 of this title a report on the programs administered by the Under Secretary for Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition. Each such report shall include the following with respect to each such program during the fiscal year covered by that report:

“(1) The number of claims received.

“(2) The number of claims decided.

“(3) The average processing time for a claim.

“(4) The number of successful outcomes (as determined by the Secretary).

“(5) The number of full-time equivalent employees.

“(6) The amounts expended for information technology.”.

(2) CLERICAL AMENDMENTS.—The tables of chapters at the beginning of title 38, United

States Code, and of part V of title 38, United States Code, are each amended by inserting after the item relating to chapter 79 the following new item:

“80. Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration 8001”.

(b) EFFECTIVE DATE.—Chapter 80 of title 38, United States Code, as added by subsection (a), shall take effect on October 1, 2020.

(c) AUTHORIZATION FOR APPROPRIATIONS FOR VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATIONS.—There is authorized to be appropriated for fiscal year 2020 for the General Operating Expenses account of the Veterans Benefits Administration \$3,025,000,000.

(d) LABOR RIGHTS.—Any labor rights, inclusion in the bargaining unit, and collective bargaining agreement that affects an employee of the Department of Veterans Affairs who is transferred to the Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration, as established under chapter 80 of title 38, United States Code, as added by subsection (a), shall apply in the same manner to such employee after such transfer.

SEC. 2. UNDER SECRETARY FOR VETERANS ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY AND TRANSITION.

(a) UNDER SECRETARY.—

(1) IN GENERAL.—Chapter 3 of title 38, United States Code, is amended by inserting after section 306 the following new section:

“§306A. Under Secretary for Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition

“(a) UNDER SECRETARY.—There is in the Department an Under Secretary for Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition, who is appointed by the President, by and with the advice and consent of the Senate. The Under Secretary for Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition shall be appointed without regard to political affiliation or activity and solely on the basis of demonstrated ability in—

“(1) information technology; and

“(2) the administration of programs within the Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration or programs of similar content and scope.

“(b) RESPONSIBILITIES.—The Under Secretary for Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition is the head of, and is directly responsible to the Secretary for the operations of, the Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration.

“(c) VACANCIES.—(1) Whenever a vacancy in the position of Under Secretary for Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition occurs or is anticipated, the Secretary shall establish a commission to recommend individuals to the President for appointment to the position.

“(2) A commission established under this subsection shall be composed of the following members appointed by the Secretary:

“(A) Three persons representing education and training, vocational rehabilitation, employment, real estate, mortgage finance and related industries, and survivor benefits activities affected by the Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration.

“(B) Two persons representing veterans served by the Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration.

“(C) Two persons who have experience in the management of private sector benefits programs of similar content and scope to the economic opportunity and transition programs of the Department.

“(D) The Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

“(E) The chairman of the Veterans' Advisory Committee on Education formed under section 3692 of this title.

“(F) One person who has held the position of Under Secretary for Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition, if the Secretary determines that it is desirable for such person to be a member of the commission.