

Those currently working with the program at the National Cemetery Administration, in institutions of higher learning, and in community groups tell us that a grant program, as opposed to a Federal contract program, would solve most, if not all, of the administrative problems related to accessing funds in a consistent and flexible way.

H.R. 2385 does that by simply allowing the VA to provide grant funding to the Veterans Legacy Program.

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

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

Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of H.R. 2385, as amended. This bill, which is sponsored by Congressman CONOR LAMB from Pennsylvania, a United States Marine Corps veteran, would authorize the Department of Veterans Affairs to award grants instead of contracts to educational organizations that research the lives of those who are interred in our Nation's cemeteries.

I thank Chairman TAKANO for the amendment he offered during the committee markup of this bill to include report language to ensure that Congress has the information needed to determine whether this grant program is financially sound.

Mr. Speaker, I urge my colleagues to support H.R. 2385, as amended, and I reserve the balance of my time.

□ 1645

Mr. TAKANO. Mr. Speaker, I yield 3 minutes to the gentleman from Pennsylvania (Mr. LAMB), my good friend and vice chairman of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs, a veteran himself and author of H.R. 2385.

Mr. LAMB. Mr. Speaker, I begin by thanking Chairman TAKANO and Ranking Member ROE for their support getting this bill through committee, and my Republican colleague, BRIAN FITZPATRICK, for cosponsoring it with me.

I rise tonight in support of H.R. 2385.

Mr. Speaker, we are here on the 75th anniversary of D-Day, and it always struck me, an American general who said, if anyone ever needed proof that the United States of America fought for a cause and not for conquest, it is that when we invaded another continent halfway around the world, the only soil we ever asked to maintain was enough to bury our own dead.

It has been true, throughout generations, that veterans ask very little recognition or very little thanks for their service. I have it on good authority that, when they built the monument to World War II here in Washington, D.C., throughout that whole year, there were a number of veterans who approached the construction site after hours or early in the morning, and they handed their dog tags to the people who were working there and just asked them to throw them down in the pit underneath those big stone pillars that they were putting in the monument.

Anyone who has ever served understands that feeling, that total commitment to the cause and lack of desire for recognition. But we do programs like the Veterans Legacy Project because we need to communicate that same spirit of sacrifice to the next generation, and that is what this project can do.

The graves in these national cemeteries and the memorials that we find there cause young people, especially, to slow down in a world that is speeding up, and they express a confidence in the thing it is that they memorialize. They tell young people that there are things that are permanent in this world, as hard as that is to believe, and that there is nothing more permanent than the sacrifices that these men and women have made.

They also tell them that there is one thing that is not permanent, which is the freedom that we all live under every single day, and that it has to be refreshed and renewed with the sacrifices of people in each generation.

So by expanding this program, making it more accessible to more high schools and more colleges and more community groups, we can spread that spirit of sacrifice, of permanence, of total commitment to the cause of freedom throughout the next generation, and I can't think of any time when that has been more needed.

Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleagues for supporting this bill.

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

Mr. Speaker, I once again encourage all Members to support H.R. 2385, as amended, and I yield back the balance of my time.

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

In closing, I do want to mention a couple of important stories related to the Veterans Legacy Program.

Earlier this year, Professor Hedge Coke of the University of California, Riverside presented testimony supporting H.R. 2385, as amended.

Her research on the veterans buried at the Riverside National Cemetery—by the way, the largest national cemetery in terms of its geography in my district. She developed teaching curricula for local teachers. She has remarkable energy in the remarkable attention that she has brought to the cemetery. Her students use her educational programs to revitalize the stories of the men and women buried there.

And, Mr. Speaker, at our hearing, Professor Hedge Coke told us that the Veterans Legacy Program doesn't just bring students and community members to the cemeteries; it takes the history of the cemeteries back to the classrooms. Undergraduates, graduate students, and recent alumni of UC Riverside go to local classrooms, from kindergarten through high school, to foster this programming.

She said that in almost every classroom, a good third of the students have

significant ties to the cemetery they didn't know anything about. This allows discovery of family and neighborhood ties and encourages cultural development within the community.

To date, her program has produced dozens of lesson plans, and she has worked with over 2,700 students in local public schools, including the Sherman Indian High School.

I also want to say that one of the heroes that is buried at that cemetery, Riverside National Cemetery, is Ysmael "Smiley" Villegas from Casa Blanca, who earned the Medal of Honor by charging enemy foxholes in World War II. He was killed 1 day short of his 21st birthday.

Smiley Villegas' neighborhood, Casa Blanca, is a small neighborhood of about 225 families; yet this neighborhood of 225 families sent 254 troops to serve in World War II.

Mr. Speaker, the Veterans Legacy Program helps to memorialize veterans like Smiley and the enormous contributions of minority communities like Casa Blanca.

The program recently created an interactive web app and digital mapping of Riverside National Cemetery. It includes gravestone tributes from local students, along with information about the cemetery's construction, history, and notes of interest, such as Native American and indigenous American veterans buried there.

In Professor Hedge Coke's words: "The Legacy Program delivers this terrific meeting of story and culture to the university, K-12 schools, and the surrounding cultures and communities that make up our region."

Mr. Speaker, I wholeheartedly encourage all of my colleagues to join me in passing H.R. 2385, 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. 2385, 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. TAKANO. 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.

VA WEBSITE ACCESSIBILITY ACT OF 2019

Mr. TAKANO. Mr. Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and pass the bill (H.R. 1199) to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to conduct a study regarding the accessibility of websites of the Department of Veterans Affairs to individuals with disabilities.

The Clerk read the title of the bill.

The text of the bill is as follows:

H.R. 1199

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 Website Accessibility Act of 2019”.

SEC. 2. STUDY REGARDING THE ACCESSIBILITY OF WEBSITES OF THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS TO INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES.

(a) STUDY.—Not later than 180 days after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall examine all websites (including attached files and web-based applications) of the Department of Veterans Affairs to determine whether such websites are accessible to individuals with disabilities in accordance with section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (29 U.S.C. 794d).

(b) REPORT.—Not later than 90 days after completing the study under subsection (a), the Secretary shall submit a report to Congress regarding such study. The report shall include the following:

(1) A list of each website, file, or web-based application described in subsection (a) that is not accessible to individuals with disabilities in accordance with section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (29 U.S.C. 794d).

(2) For each website, file, or web-based application identified under paragraph (1), a description of the barriers to bringing such website, file, or web-based application into compliance with the requirements of such section, including barriers relating to staffing.

(3) The plan of the Secretary to bring each website, file, or web-based application identified in the list under paragraph (1) into compliance with the requirements of section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (29 U.S.C. 794d).

(c) DEFINITION OF WEBSITE.—In this section, the term “website” includes a kiosk at a Department of Veterans Affairs medical facility, the use of which is required to check in for scheduled appointments.

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. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members may have 5 legislative days in which to revise and extend their remarks and to insert extraneous material on H.R. 1199.

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

There was no objection.

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

Mr. Speaker, I rise in support of H.R. 1199, the VA Website Accountability Act of 2019, introduced by Representative ELAINE LURIA, chair of our Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs. This bill directs VA to conduct a study regarding the accessibility of VA websites to individuals with disabilities.

Since 1998, Federal law has required VA to make electronic and information technology accessible to people with disabilities. Unimpeded access to VA resources, including websites and mo-

bile apps, is crucial because it serves as a gateway to VA services and benefits.

However, VA has a long history of stating that it is “working toward compliance,” while failing to ensure that all of its websites are accessible to the blind via use of electronic readers. In fact, VA has had more than 20 years to comply with the law.

Mr. Speaker, this was especially concerning last year when the Veteran Crisis Line was updated, and because the chat feature was no longer accessible for the visually impaired, it left blind veterans unable to access this lifesaving resource.

Other barriers visually impaired veterans face when accessing VA websites include forms that are incompatible with the screen reader software or magnification programs; small buttons that are hidden among other items, making them very difficult to find; elements like checked boxes and buttons that are not properly labeled; and tables that cannot be navigated cell by cell so screen reader software and magnification programs cannot read them.

Now, H.R. 1199 does not propose any changes to existing Federal law; instead, it requires VA to examine all of its websites to determine whether or not they are accessible to individuals with disabilities so it can comply with the law.

H.R. 1199 also requires VA to compile a complete list of noncompliant websites and kiosks and submit a plan to Congress detailing how it plans to bring those websites into legal compliance.

Mr. Speaker, the Blinded Veterans Association estimates there are currently over 130,000 legally blind veterans living in this country and another 1.5 million veterans with low vision. But last year, over 42,000 of these veterans had cases open with a visual impairment services team coordinator at VA because they could not access websites and mobile apps.

The number of visually impaired veterans is expected to grow as the U.S. population ages in the next 20 years. We cannot wait another 20 years for VA to comply with the law.

This growing population will need to access VA’s websites, apps, medical center information kiosks, telehealth tools, disability benefits, and other programs and services administered by VA both now and for the foreseeable future.

Since many veterans are comfortable accessing information, scheduling appointments, and communicating using information technology, visually impaired veterans want the same access to these tools that VA offers to other veterans.

When concerns about the accessibility of websites, documents, and other equipment and media used to communicate with veterans are minimized or ignored, some of our Nation’s most vulnerable veterans—those with catastrophic disabilities—are left behind.

So Mr. Speaker, when these veterans are denied access to information and services, they are at risk for further aggravation of their disabilities and, in some cases, even suicide.

The longer we wait, the greater the risk.

I urge all Members to support H.R. 1199, and I reserve the balance of my time.

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

Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of H.R. 1199, the VA Website Accessibility Act of 2019. This bill would require the Department of Veterans Affairs to examine all websites, apps, attachments, and electronic forms, determine which are inaccessible to veterans with disabilities, and develop a plan to make each of them accessible.

Visually impaired veterans, in particular, often face barriers to accessing information from VA because they are directed to forms or pages that are incompatible with screen readers. This bill would require VA to take systematic action to address these issues, ensuring that all veterans are able to access needed VA information.

Mr. Speaker, I encourage my colleagues to support H.R. 1199, and I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. TAKANO. Mr. Speaker, I yield 3 minutes to the gentlewoman from Virginia (Mrs. LURIA), my good friend and chairman of the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, also the sponsor of H.R. 1199 and a veteran herself.

Mrs. LURIA. Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of this commonsense and bipartisan bill to make VA websites accessible and understandable for all veterans.

Our servicemembers put themselves in harm’s way to protect American freedom. It is only right that Congress uphold our end of the promise by giving them the care that they earned.

One of my top priorities in Congress is eliminating barriers preventing our bravest men and women from receiving quality medical care, as well as disability, vocational, and educational benefits.

I met with a group of blinded veterans, and they explained that the structure of the VA websites makes it difficult for them to learn about treatments and schedule their doctor appointments. I knew I had to act.

To remedy this problem, I introduced the VA Website Accessibility Act, which will require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to conduct a study of the accessibility of VA websites for veterans with disabilities. Upon completion of the study, the Secretary will be required to report to Congress on the study’s results and provide a plan to improve these websites.

This bill will ensure that the ailments and trauma our servicemembers endured during battle will not prevent them from using the resources that VA websites have to offer. Veterans affected by blindness or hearing loss have

sacrificed for our Nation. They deserve equal access to all VA services, and I am honored to champion their cause.

Our heroes should not have to wait one day longer. Today, we can help thousands of veterans receive better access to healthcare resources.

Mr. Speaker, I urge support of the VA Website Accessibility Act, H.R. 1199.

□ 1700

Mr. DAVID P. ROE of Tennessee. Mr. Speaker, I have no further speakers and am prepared to close. I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Mr. Speaker, I would challenge that people who are sight impaired in this country have a 75 percent unemployment rate, if you look at that.

The challenge that I do each year and what I do to myself when my sight-impaired constituents come to my office is I go back to my small apartment that I have and I put a blindfold on, and I try to get around and just do simple tasks of the day. And you find out how very difficult that is.

I could not be more supportive of this legislation, and I thank the gentleman for bringing it up because, try on your computer when you can't see to get information you need to get services. You have to have someone there to help you.

We have the technology available today, if it is used at the VA, so that these men and women who have served this country can also have the access that every other veteran has.

Mr. Speaker, I strongly support this bill, H.R. 1199, and I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. TAKANO. Mr. Speaker, I have no further speakers and am prepared to close.

Mr. Speaker, I, again, want to urge all of my colleagues to join me in passing H.R. 1199, Mrs. LURIA's legislation, and I yield back the balance of my time.

Ms. JACKSON LEE. Mr. Speaker, I rise in strong support of H.R. 1199, the "Directing of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to conduct a study regarding the accessibility of websites of the Department of Veterans Affairs to individuals with disabilities."

H.R. 1199 permits the Secretary of VA to use grants rather than federal contracts to fund cemetery research programs and produce educational materials as part of the Veterans Legacy Program.

This bill directs the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to report to Congress regarding the accessibility of VA websites (including attached files and web based applications) to individuals with disabilities.

According to the United States Census Bureau 31,390 residents in Harris County, Texas are disabled veterans and this study would greatly benefit them.

The report shall identify websites, files, and applications that are not accessible to such individuals and include the VA's plan to make each of them accessible.

There are 21.8 million veterans of the U.S. armed forces as of 2014, according the Census Bureau, approximately 10 percent of whom are women.

The states with the highest number of veteran residents are California with 2 million, Texas with 1.6 million and Florida also with 1.6 million.

Each of these states have major military bases including Fort Hood in Texas, Fort Irwin in California and Naval Air Station Pensacola.

The Department of Veterans Affairs offers health and welfare services to veterans but has fallen short in its task of serving the mental and physical needs of generations of former troops.

The study required by this bill must be enacted no later than 180 days after the date of the enactment of this bill.

Once this study has been conducted we will be better able to assist veterans with disabilities in accessing the website for resources.

It is critical for the United States Congress to ensure that veterans have access to the resources they need.

Mr. Speaker, I urge my colleagues to join me in supporting H.R. 1199 to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to conduct a study regarding the accessibility of websites of the Department of Veterans Affairs to individuals with disabilities.

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. 1199.

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.

WILSON AND YOUNG MEDAL OF HONOR VA CLINIC

Mr. TAKANO. Mr. Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and pass the bill (H.R. 2334) to designate the Department of Veterans Affairs community-based outpatient clinic in Odessa, Texas, as the "Wilson and Young Medal of Honor VA Clinic".

The Clerk read the title of the bill. The text of the bill is as follows:

H.R. 2334

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

SECTION 1. DESIGNATION OF WILSON AND YOUNG MEDAL OF HONOR VA CLINIC.

(a) FINDING.—Congress finds that Private First Class Alfred "Mac" Wilson of the Marine Corps and Staff Sergeant Marvin "Rex" Young of the Army were both posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for their heroic actions in the Vietnam War.

(b) DESIGNATION.—The Department of Veterans Affairs community-based outpatient clinic in Odessa, Texas, shall after the date of the enactment of this Act be known and designated as the "Wilson and Young Medal of Honor VA Clinic".

(c) REFERENCES.—Any reference in a law, map, regulation, document, paper, or other record of the United States to the facility referred to in subsection (b) shall be deemed to be a reference to the "Wilson and Young Medal of Honor VA Clinic".

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. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members may have 5 legislative days in which to revise and extend their remarks and to insert extraneous material on H.R. 2334.

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

There was no objection.

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

Mr. Speaker, I rise to honor the lives of Army Staff Sergeant Marvin "Rex" Young and Marine Corps Private First Class Alfred "Mac" Wilson. I thank my colleague from Texas (Mr. CONAWAY) for bringing this bill before us so that we all may be able to pay tribute to two of our Nation's heroes.

As soon as the law allowed, both men signed up to serve our country during the height of the Vietnam war. It was during this war that both Staff Sergeant Young and Private First Class Wilson would ultimately give their lives in defense of our country.

Private First Class Wilson was born on January 13, 1948, in Olney, Illinois. His family moved to Odessa, Texas, in 1950, where he attended local schools before graduating from Odessa Senior High School in 1967. He enlisted in the United States Marine Corps Reserve at Abilene, Texas, on November 1, 1967, and was discharged to enlist in the Marine Corps on January 14, 1968.

At the time of his death, Private First Class Wilson was a rifleman with Company M, 3rd Battalion, 9th Marines, 3rd Marine Division.

Staff Sergeant Young was born on May 11, 1947, in Alpine, Texas, the youngest of three children born to Roy Clinton and Marilyn Young.

He joined the Army from Odessa, Texas, in September 1966 and by August 21, 1968, was serving as a staff sergeant in Company C, 1st Battalion, 5th Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division.

At two different points of the Vietnam war, these two brave men gave their lives to support the mission of their respective units and were both posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.

For Private First Class Wilson, it was March 3, 1969, when the first platoon of Company M was ambushed by the North Vietnamese Army after returning from patrol. Intense automatic weapons fire and grenade attacks wounded the platoon's gunner and assistant gunner.

Acting as squad leader, Private Wilson put himself in between enemy fire and his men to retrieve the machine gun from the wounded marines so that his platoon could maintain a heavy volume of fire against the enemy.

When he reached the M-60 machine gun, a North Vietnamese soldier threw a grenade at him, landing between Private First Class Wilson and another