

Ranking Member TESTER, Chairman TAKANO, and, once again, to Dr. ROE.

Mr. TAKANO. Madam Speaker, I yield 3 minutes to the gentleman from California (Mr. CISNEROS), my good friend and member of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee.

Mr. CISNEROS. Madam Speaker, I rise today in support of the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act.

As this month marks National Suicide Prevention Awareness Month, I am grateful the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees are working across the aisle to improve mental health services for our veterans. I am proud that this package includes my bipartisan bill, the STOP Veteran Suicide and Substance Abuse Act.

We know that too many veterans struggling with mental health challenges, like PTSD, are often also dealing with substance misuse issues and the impact of various traumas, including military sexual assault.

Given how common these co-occurring problems are, VA healthcare providers need evidence-based guidance for working with multiple issues all at once. My bill ensures that the VA will develop and disseminate this clinical practice guideline to share best practices VA-wide.

Madam Speaker, I want to thank Representative MAST for working with me on this bill, and Chairman TAKANO for his tireless leadership on this issue.

And I also want to thank Dr. ROE for his years of service to the country, both as a doctor, a soldier, and as a member of this committee and service in the House of Representatives. I thank him very much for his friendship, always stopping to say hello. We are going to miss him here. But I know he will continue his service back in civilian life, and so I thank him very much for his years of service.

Mr. DAVID P. ROE of Tennessee. Madam Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. TAKANO. Madam Speaker, I yield 3 minutes to the gentlewoman from Pennsylvania (Ms. HOULAHAN), my good friend.

Ms. HOULAHAN. Madam Speaker, I want to thank the chairman for bringing this bill to the House.

Madam Speaker, I rise as well to speak in favor of S. 785.

This comprehensive package of legislation complements the other VA bills we considered yesterday and today. I want to highlight two pieces of this bill, in particular.

This bill aims to improve the mental health medical workforce at the VA. The vast majority of veterans who get their care at the VA love their experience, and that is because of the dedicated VA workforce.

However, we do need to address head-on the issue of staffing shortages. According to the most recent VA report, there are roughly 50,000 vacant positions at the VA at any given time, many of which are slots for healthcare providers.

This bill would require the VA to create a plan to address the staffing of mental healthcare providers at its facilities, and ensure that each medical center, like the one in Coatesville in my district, is staffed with a suicide prevention coordinator.

This bill also includes the Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program, which would push funding for suicide prevention services out to vetted community organizations. This is a similar one that was proposed in the Improve Act, which I was proud to help lead with my colleague across the aisle, General BERGMAN.

This will really help us reach the millions of veterans who do not use the VA for healthcare, or who are more comfortable talking about their mental health concerns in a nongovernmental setting. It will also ensure that these organizations can refer veterans to the VA when needed, ensuring that there is a warm hand-off, which is so critical when someone is in crisis.

Madam Speaker, I do want to take this opportunity to thank Chairman TAKANO for his leadership on this critically important issue. The fact that the House is poised to pass not only S. 785, but also the chairman's Veterans COMPACT Act, and a variety of other related bills, is truly a testament to his laser-like focus on this issue.

Representative BROWNLEY, who leads the Women Veterans Task Force, also has been especially attentive to the barriers that women veterans face as well. VA research recently found that the share of women veterans using the VA has grown nearly 15 percent in 10 years, and we need to ensure that this VA is adapting and continuing to be the veterans' first choice for quality mental healthcare regardless of gender.

Madam Speaker, it has been a pleasure to work with General BERGMAN on the Improve Act, given our common background in service. General BERGMAN and I quickly connected last year over the importance of ensuring that we use all of the tools in our toolkit, the VA, community organizations, peer support groups, and more, to reach veterans in mental health crisis where they are and where they feel comfortable.

Madam Speaker, I thank General BERGMAN and Ranking Member Dr. ROE for their leadership in getting to this moment as well.

I would like to end by saying, it is okay to not be okay. If you are experiencing a crisis or know someone who is, please dial 1-800-273-8255, and press 1. Again, 1-800-273-8255, and press 1.

Mr. DAVID P. ROE of Tennessee. Madam Speaker, first of all, we have heard numerous speakers today speak eloquently about the problems we have with veteran suicide in this country and active duty servicemembers, I mean, a horrific number of 20, which we have not changed at all in the last 20 years.

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Two decades and we are still having this problem, no matter how much money, so it was time to think outside the box, which I believe this did. No one bill, Madam Speaker, is going to solve this problem.

We have read numbers to call. Look, reach out to a friend. If you have a friend or a pastor or someone who you trust, reach out to them if you are in a dark place, and then we will get you the help you need. We will get you the resources you need because most of these decisions, many of these, are impulsive decisions that once they are avoided, that person can lead a fruitful, bountiful life.

That is what we want. We want you to reach out, and we will get you the help you need to get you from the place you are to a place of a productive, helpful life.

I thank all the Members, especially the chairman, who made this his primary goal, suicide prevention. I thank him for that.

Madam Speaker, I urge my colleagues to support this bill, and I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. TAKANO. Madam Speaker, I urge all of my colleagues to join me in passing S. 785. I thank all of my colleagues who worked on this bill on both sides of the aisle, and I yield back the balance of my time.

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Ms. DEAN). The question is on the motion offered by the gentleman from California (Mr. TAKANO) that the House suspend the rules and pass the bill, S. 785.

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.

STOPPING HARM AND IMPLEMENTING ENHANCED LEAD-TIME FOR DEBTS FOR VETERANS ACT

Mr. TAKANO. Madam Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and pass the bill (H.R. 5245) to amend title 38, United States Code, to provide for a bar on the recovery of certain payments or overpayments made by the Department of Veterans Affairs by reason of delays in processing of certain information, and for other purposes, as amended.

The Clerk read the title of the bill.

The text of the bill is as follows:

H.R. 5245

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 "Stopping Harm and Implementing Enhanced Lead-time for Debts for Veterans Act" or the "SHIELD for Veterans Act".

SEC. 2. PROHIBITION OF DEBT ARISING FROM OVERPAYMENT DUE TO DELAY IN PROCESSING BY THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS.

(a) BAR TO RECOVERY.—

(1) IN GENERAL.—Chapter 53 of title 38, United States Code, is amended by inserting after section 5302A the following new section:

“§ 5302B. Prohibition of debt arising from overpayment due to delay in processing

“(a) LIMITATION.—No individual may incur a debt to the United States that—

“(1) arises from any program or benefit administered by the Under Secretary for Benefits; and

“(2) is attributable to the failure of an employee or official of the Department to process information provided by or on behalf of that individual within applicable timeliness standards established by the Secretary.

“(b) NOTICE TO BENEFICIARY.—If the Secretary determines that the Secretary has made an overpayment to an individual, the Secretary shall provide notice to the individual of the overpayment. Such notice shall include an explanation of the right of the individual to dispute the overpayment or to request a waiver of indebtedness.

“(c) DELAY ON COLLECTION.—The Secretary may not take any action under section 3711 of title 31 regarding an overpayment described in a notice under subsection (b) until the date that is 90 days after the date the Secretary issues such notice.”.

(2) CLERICAL AMENDMENT.—The table of sections at the beginning of such chapter is amended by inserting after the item relating to section 5302A the following new item:

“5302B. Prohibition of debt arising from overpayment due to delay in processing.”.

(3) DEADLINE.—The Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall prescribe regulations to establish standards under section 5302B(a)(2) of such title, as added by subsection (a), not later than 180 days after the date of the enactment of this Act.

(b) PLAN FOR IMPROVED NOTIFICATION AND COMMUNICATION OF DEBTS.—Not later than 180 days after the date of the enactment of this Act, and one year thereafter, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall submit to Congress a report on the improvement of the notification of and communication with individuals who receive overpayments made by the Secretary. Such report shall include each of the following:

(1) The plan of the Secretary to carry out each of the following:

(A) The development and implementation of a mechanism by which individuals enrolled in the patient enrollment system under section 1705 of title 38, United States Code, may view their monthly patient medical statements electronically.

(B) The development and implementation of a mechanism by which individuals eligible for benefits under the laws administered by the Secretary may receive electronic correspondence relating to debt and overpayment information.

(C) The development and implementation, by not later than October 1, 2022, of a mechanism by which individuals eligible for benefits under the laws administered by the Secretary may access information related to Department of Veterans Affairs debt electronically.

(D) The improvement and clarification of Department communications relating to overpayments and debt collection, including letters and electronic correspondence. The Secretary shall develop such improvements and clarifications in consultation with veterans service organizations and other relevant non-governmental organizations.

(E) The development and implementation, by not later than October 1, 2022, of a mechanism by which veterans may update their dependency information electronically.

(2) A description of the current efforts and plans for improving the accuracy of pay-

ments to individuals entitled to benefits under the laws administered by the Secretary, including specific data matching agreements.

(3) A description of steps to be taken to improve the identification of underpayments to such individuals and to improve Department procedures and policies to ensure that such individuals who are underpaid receive adequate compensation payments.

(4) A list of actions completed, implementation steps, and timetables for each requirement described in paragraphs (1) through (3).

(5) A description of any new legislative authority required to complete any such requirement.

SEC. 3. THRESHOLD FOR REPORTING DEBTS TO CONSUMER REPORTING AGENCIES.

(a) IN GENERAL.—Chapter 53 of title 38, United States Code, is amended by adding after section 5319 the following new section:

“§ 5320. Threshold for reporting debts to consumer reporting agencies

“The Secretary shall prescribe regulations that establish the minimum amount of a claim or debt, arising from a benefit administered by the Under Secretary for Benefits or Under Secretary for Health, that the Secretary will report to a consumer reporting agency under section 3711 of title 31.”.

(b) CLERICAL AMENDMENT.—The table of sections at the beginning of such chapter is amended by adding after the item relating to section 5319 the following new item:

“5320. Threshold for reporting debts to consumer reporting agencies.”.

(c) DEADLINE.—The Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall prescribe regulations under section 5320 of such title, as added by subsection (a), not later than 180 days after the date of the enactment of this Act.

SEC. 4. REMOVAL OF DEPENDENTS FROM AWARD OF COMPENSATION OR PENSION.

The Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall ensure that—

(1) a veteran may remove any dependent from an award of compensation or pension to the veteran using the eBenefits system of the Department of Veterans Affairs, or a successor system; and

(2) such removal takes effect not later than 60 days after the date on which the veteran makes such removal.

SEC. 5. DETERMINATION OF BUDGETARY EFFECTS.

The budgetary effects of this Act, for the purpose of complying with the Statutory Pay-As-You-Go Act of 2010, shall be determined by reference to the latest statement titled “Budgetary Effects of PAYGO Legislation” for this Act, submitted for printing in the Congressional Record by the Chairman of the House Budget Committee, provided that such statement has been submitted prior to the vote on passage.

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 to insert extraneous material on H.R. 5245, 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, I rise in support of H.R. 5245, as amended, the Stopping Harm and Implementing Enhanced Lead-Time for Debts for Veterans Act, or the SHIELD for Veterans Act. It would create important steps to improve how VA handles overpayments made to veterans. The Department's process for collecting overpayments that it makes must be fair and reasonable and consider the potential hardships when an error is discovered. This legislation does just that.

Further, the legislation would make overpayments less common by improving the information available to beneficiaries and modernize how veterans can provide updates to VA on their eligibility and status.

The SHIELD Act was sponsored by Chairman CHRIS PAPPAS, who leads our Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee. The bill was developed based on hearings Chairman PAPPAS held during the session. The subcommittee also conducted extensive oversight of VA collections.

Finally, the legislation takes into account the experiences and input of veterans service organizations that help veterans navigate what is an overly complex current collections process that leaves many understandably frustrated.

I also appreciate the bipartisan nature of this bill. Our oversight was conducted with the minority that also offered improvements to the bill, which were incorporated into the current language.

I support this bill, and I urge my colleagues to do the same. I thank Mr. PAPPAS for sponsoring this important legislation and urge my colleagues to support H.R. 5245, 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. 5245, as amended, the SHIELD for Veterans Act.

This bill would prohibit the Department of Veterans Affairs from collecting on debts from the Veterans Benefits Administration that arise out of VA's failure to process changes in a veteran's entitlement to benefits within certain timeliness standards.

Veterans should not face financial hardships due to delays or errors made by VA, nor should Congress accept that forgiving debts is a long-term solution. Rather, we need to strive to eliminate the creation of the debt in the first place.

H.R. 5245 would do that by addressing one of the major root causes of debt.

Certainly, veterans can add dependents to their compensation or pension award using VA's eBenefits online tool, and that change is effective immediately. However, VA does not allow for the immediate removal of dependents using that same tool.

Because the removal of a veteran dependent requires a manual review, a debt is often created because VA's lengthy review process results in overpayments to veterans that, by law, VA must attempt to recoup.

I thank my good friend and fellow veteran, the ranking member of the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, Congressman MIKE BOST from Illinois, for amending this bill while it was being considered in committee to require VA to establish a process to allow a veteran to remove a dependent through eBenefits as seamlessly as they add a dependent. This would remove the bureaucratic and archaic hurdles of the current paper-based process and reduce the creation of debts.

The remainder of the bill would streamline and improve VBA's debt collection process, so veterans have a transparent understanding of their rights and how to dispute debts when they do occur.

I thank the chairman and ranking member of the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigation, Congressman CHRIS PAPPAS from New Hampshire and General JACK BERGMAN from Michigan, for their work on this bill. I also thank Chairman PAPPAS for amending the bill that we reported out of the committee to address late-identified CBO scoring issues.

I believe that our bipartisan efforts produced a policy that is good for veterans and taxpayers alike, and I encourage my colleagues to join me in supporting this bill today.

Madam Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. TAKANO. Madam Speaker, I yield 5 minutes to the gentleman from New Hampshire (Mr. PAPPAS), my good friend, the chairman of the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, and also the author of this important piece of legislation.

Mr. PAPPAS. Madam Speaker, I thank the gentleman for yielding.

Madam Speaker, I thank Chairman TAKANO and Ranking Member ROE for their words, as well as for their efforts to help us get to yes on this important piece of legislation.

I rise in support of H.R. 5245, a bill I introduced along with my colleague, Congressman MAX ROSE, to fix some major problems directly affecting our veterans.

Last year, I heard from one of my constituents, New Hampshire veteran Jeff Varney, who contacted my office for assistance. Jeff, like thousands of other veterans across the country, is facing tremendous financial hardship due to VA errors.

Jeff was in disbelief when the VA informed him that he needed to repay years of benefit overpayments because of an apparent error that VA made decades ago.

So after a lifetime of service, and through no fault of his own, Jeff was told he is on the hook for more than \$11,000, even though VA produced no

accounting of how these debts were accrued.

Unfortunately, Jeff is not alone in this experience, and too many of our veterans are badly surprised when they receive letters saying they owe the VA money. Sometimes these debts reach thousands of dollars. During the hearings held by our Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee, we heard from veterans service organizations about the pain and hardship that these surprises may bring.

Last fiscal year, the VA collected \$1.6 billion in debts from veterans. Sometimes these debts result from mistakes in disability payouts, changes in eligibility, or simple accounting errors that place an undue, unexpected financial burden on our veterans.

It is long past the time to clean this issue up. That is why today I am asking my colleagues to support the SHIELD for Veterans Act, which reforms VA debt collection processes and ensures we are making good on the promises we have made to our veterans.

The SHIELD Act prevents VA from collecting overpayments that came as a result of their own delays in processing and requires the VA to provide our veterans notice of an overpayment and their plan to collect it. It also requires VA to notify veterans of their ability to dispute the overpayment or request a waiver.

Under this bill, VA will issue a report to Congress on a plan to improve communications with our veterans on the debt issue.

The last thing that my constituent needs, and other constituents need, is to be hounded by debt collectors, especially if they have done everything right.

This is a bipartisan, commonsense bill, and I really want to thank the majority and minority staff for their work. I thank my ranking member, General BERGMAN, as well as Congressman BOST, for their contributions to helping make this bill better.

It is simply unacceptable that VA's mistakes or inefficiencies are going to hurt the men and women that they are supposed to serve.

Madam Speaker, I urge my colleagues to support this legislation.

Mr. DAVID P. ROE of Tennessee. Madam Speaker, I encourage my colleagues to support this commonsense bill. It is one of the most common things we hear in our office, about an outrageous debt that a veteran owes back that they didn't know they owed because of a bureaucratic snafu. We have all heard these cases.

I thank my colleagues for bringing this up. We should have done this years ago.

Madam Speaker, I encourage my colleagues to support this bill, and I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. TAKANO. Madam Speaker, I, too, urge passage of this commonsense solution. I very much also appreciate the bipartisan agreement that we have

reached that this is, indeed, a problem we should have fixed many years ago.

Madam Speaker, I urge my colleagues to join me in passing H.R. 5245, 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 California (Mr. TAKANO) that the House suspend the rules and pass the bill, H.R. 5245, 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.

DEPENDABLE EMPLOYMENT AND LIVING IMPROVEMENTS FOR VETERANS ECONOMIC RECOVERY ACT

Mr. TAKANO. Madam Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and pass the bill (H.R. 7105) to provide flexibility for the Secretary of Veterans Affairs in caring for homeless veterans during a covered public health emergency, and for other purposes, as amended.

The Clerk read the title of the bill.

The text of the bill is as follows:

H.R. 7105

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

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE; TABLE OF CONTENTS.

(a) SHORT TITLE.—This Act may be cited as the “Dependable Employment and Living Improvements for Veterans Economic Recovery Act” or the “DELIVER Act”.

(b) TABLE OF CONTENTS.—The table of contents for this Act is as follows:

Sec. 1. Short title; table of contents.

TITLE I—ASSISTANCE FOR HOMELESS VETERANS

Sec. 101. Flexibility for the Secretary of Veterans Affairs in caring for homeless veterans during a covered public health emergency.

Sec. 102. Expansion of eligibility for HUD-VASH.

Sec. 103. Legal services for homeless veterans and veterans at risk for homelessness.

Sec. 104. Gap analysis of Department of Veterans Affairs Programs that provide assistance to women veterans who are homeless.

Sec. 105. Improvements to grants and agreements between the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and entities that provide services to homeless veterans.

Sec. 106. Repeal of sunset on authority to carry out program of referral and counseling services for veterans at risk for homelessness who are transitioning from certain institutions.

Sec. 107. Coordination of case management services for veterans receiving housing vouchers under Tribal HUD-VASH program.

Sec. 108. Contracting for HUD-VASH case managers.

Sec. 109. Report on HUD-VASH staffing, training, and data systems.

TITLE II—RETRAINING ASSISTANCE FOR VETERANS

Sec. 201. COVID-19 Veteran Rapid Retraining Assistance Program.