



# UNITED STATES SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

JOHNNY ISAKSON | CHAIR

RICHARD BLUMENTHAL | RANKING MEMBER

## *The Veterans First Act*

### Putting Veterans First through Bipartisan Reform

On Thursday, April 28, 2016, U.S. Senators Johnny Isakson, R-Ga., and Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., chairman and ranking member of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, respectively, announced the *Veterans First Act*, a bipartisan omnibus package that will improve accountability at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and make sweeping improvements to veterans' health care and benefits.

### Summary of Key Provisions

#### **Title I – Accountability**

- Grants expedited removal authority for all employees at VA based on performance or misconduct.
- Provides VA Secretary additional flexibility in hiring and firing senior executives.
- Reduces benefits for senior executives who have committed certain crimes.
- Limits the amount of time employees can be placed on paid administrative leave while being investigated and prohibits employees from collecting a salary while waiting for a disciplinary appeal.
- Prohibits bonuses for employees who have been found guilty of wrongdoing.
- Creates an Office of Accountability and Whistleblower Protection at the VA as an independent office within VA for all matters regarding accountability and whistleblower protection and gives Congress more oversight over accountability at the department.
- Allows the VA to provide competitive pay to VISN Directors and Medical Center Directors, making it easier to attract top talent to run VA hospitals.
- Requires the VA to conduct an outside review of management training for VA senior executives.

#### **Title II – Health Care**

- Strengthens the Veterans Choice program by establishing prompt payment standards and streamlining the requirements for community medical providers to enter into agreements with the VA.
- Expands VA's Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers to all generations of veterans and expands the services for caregivers to include financial planning and legal services.
- Requires the VA to implement improvements to the caregivers program, as recommended by the Government Accountability Office, including implementing an information technology system that fully supports the program.
- Enhances the VA's mental health services by making it easier to hire mental health professionals.
- Addresses the crisis of opioid over-prescription among veterans by increasing the availability of medication to counter effects of opioid overdoses.
- Enhances research on potential health effects from toxic exposure to veterans and their descendants.
- Allows VA physicians and physician assistants to work more flexible hours.\*

#### **Title III – Disability Compensation and Pension**

- Makes it easier for survivors of veterans to get benefits without filing a formal claim.

- Requires the VA to carry out a fully-developed appeals pilot program, which will allow the VA to start testing the concept of a heavily streamlined process and will not preclude a more comprehensive reform package when it is ready. Allows the Board of Veterans' Appeals to increase use of video hearings.
- Increases oversight of the VA regional offices through a Government Accountability Office review.

#### **Title IV – Education**

- Expands Post-9/11 GI Bill eligibility to thousands of mobilized Reservists.
- Authorizes additional benefits for spouses and children and allows surviving spouses more time to use education benefits.
- Allows VA to reinstate benefits to veterans when their school permanently closes.
- Improves the approval and oversight of education programs by VA.
- Enhances programs that prepare veterans for careers through licensure and certification programs.

#### **Title V – Employment and Transition**

- Requires the Department of Labor to coordinate with state level agencies to help veterans find jobs.
- Requires non-governmental study of job counseling, training and placement services for veterans.

#### **Title VI – Homeless Veterans**

- Expands VA's definition of homeless to include those fleeing domestic violence.
- Expands eligibility for the Department of Labor's Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program.
- Provides for case management for veterans most at-risk for becoming homeless.
- Codifies the existing National Center on Homelessness Among Veterans.
- Authorizes the VA to partner with entities to provide legal services to homeless veterans.\*

#### **Title VII – United States Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims**

- Continues temporary expansion of Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims to help the Court keep up with incoming appeals.

#### **Title VIII – Burial Benefits**

- Allows for active duty designees, including the Women's Air Force Service Pilots and Merchant Marines, to be inurned at Arlington National Cemetery.
- Requires the Army to report to Congress on the interment and inurnment capacity of Arlington National Cemetery.
- Requires the VA to complete a study on the scope of issues related to unclaimed remains of veterans.

#### **Title IX – Other Matters**

- Directs the President to issue a proclamation annually on Veterans Day to observe a moment of silence in honor of the service and sacrifice of veterans.
- Honors as veterans certain individuals who performed service in the reserve components of the Armed Forces.
- Restores the ability of the West Los Angeles VA Medical Center Director to provide long-term assisted living to at-risk veterans.\*

\* *Indicates a legislative priority of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs.*