



GOT YOUR SIX

Statement for the Record
By
Lauren Augustine
Director of Government Relations
of
Got Your 6
before the
Senate Veterans Affairs Committee
hearing on
Pending Legislation

May 17, 2017

Bill Num.	Bill Name or Subject	Sponsor	Position
S. 23	Biological Implant Tracking and Veteran Safety Act	Sen. Cassidy (R-LA)	No Position
S. 112	Creating a Reliable Environment for Veterans' Dependents Act	Sen. Heller (R-NV)	Support
S. 324	State Veterans Home Adult Health Care Improvement Act	Sen. Hatch (R-UT)	No Position
S. 543	Performance Accountability and Contractor Transparency Act	Sen. Tester (D-MT)	No Position
S. 591	Military and Veteran Caregivers Services Improvements Act	Sen. Murray(D-WA)	Support
S. 609	Chiropractic Care Available to All Veterans Act	Sen. Moran (R-KS)	No Position
S. 681	Deborah Sampson Act	Sen. Tester (D-MT)	Support
S. 764	Veterans Education Priority Enrollment Act	Sen. Brown (D-OH)	No Position
S. 784	Veterans' COLA Act	Sen. Isakson (R-GA)	No Position
S. 804	Women Veterans Access to Quality Care Act	Sen. Heller (R-NV)	Support
S. 899	Veteran Transition Improvement Act	Sen. Hirono (D-HI)	No Position
S. 1024	Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act	Sen. Isakson (R-GA)	Support
S. 1094	Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act	Sen. Rubio (R-FL)	Support
Draft	Serving our Rural Veterans Act	Sen. Sullivan (R-AK)	Support
Draft	Veteran Partners' Efforts to Enhance Reintegration Act	Sen. Blumenthal (D-CT)	Support



Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Tester and Distinguished Members of the Committee, on behalf of Got Your 6, I would like to extend our gratitude for the opportunity to share our views regarding several of these pieces of legislation.

The mission of Got Your 6 is to empower veterans to lead a resurgence of community across the country. Got Your 6 believes, and our research confirms, veterans are leaders, team builders, and problem solvers who have the unique potential to strengthen communities across the country. As a coalition, Got Your 6 works to integrate these perspectives into popular culture, engage veterans and civilians together to foster understanding, drive veteran empowerment policy, and empower veterans to lead in their communities.

This month, we celebrated the five-year anniversary of Got Your 6. Formed out of Hollywood as a movement to more accurately portray veterans in film and television, Got Your 6 has since gone on to lead the veteran empowerment movement by spearheading and publishing research, which proves veterans are civic assets, granting out more than \$6 million dollars to our best-in-class nonprofit partners, and leading an effort to change the national narrative around veterans as “broken heroes.” Building on that success, Got Your 6 was proud to launch a policy department early in 2017 aimed at bringing the existing successes of the veteran empowerment movement and messaging to the halls of Congress.

The Got Your 6 policy framework includes advocating for legislation that:

1. Supports efforts to change the current narrative of veterans as only “broken heroes”;
2. identifies common sense reform that does not detract from existing services but does increase efficiency or cost savings;
3. recognizes the entire veteran population, including the 13 million who do not use the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for their health care needs; and,
4. supports a strong VA that adequately meets the needs of those veterans who choose to use it.

S. 112, the Creating a Reliable Environment for Veterans’ Dependents Act

The Creating a Reliable Environment for Veterans’ Dependents Act would allow VA-funded homeless shelters to be reimbursed for services provided to dependents of veterans.

Got Your 6 supports this bill, appropriately resourced by Congress, as a means to empower veterans with dependents out of homelessness and back into their communities. At Got Your 6, we view families and dependents as part of the whole of a veteran. Excluding coverage for veterans’ dependents from the care and services at homeless shelters has the potential to exacerbate the complications of homelessness for a vulnerable population of veterans and could perpetuate homelessness.

Allowing the VA to reimburse homeless shelters for veterans’ dependents goes beyond providing families a place to sleep. The ancillary services, such as employment training, available to veterans utilizing VA’s homeless services, provide the critical tools necessary to ensure long-term successful



integration into the civilian world. Veterans with dependents could especially benefit from these services and use them to empower themselves and their families into sustainable housing and stronger community reintegration.

S. 591, the Military and Veteran Caregivers Services Improvement Act

The Military and Veteran Caregivers Services Improvement Act would expand the current VA caregivers program to veterans of all eras, expand eligibility parameters for the program, create a national interagency working group, and add additional services to the program, among other provisions.

Veteran and military caregivers provide daily care for our nation's most grievously wounded veterans, often leading to their own employment, financial, and health challenges. The VA's current caregiver program is intended to provide comprehensive support for these individuals, connecting them with VA professionals who can aid and empower them to best support their veteran while leading fulfilling lives of their own. However, the current program is limited to caregivers of post-9/11 veterans leaving the vast majority of caregivers with limited support and resources.

Got Your 6 supports this legislation -- services and support intended to empower caregivers should not be tied to a specific generation of service. Got Your 6 appreciates the VA's concerns with expanding its current caregiver program and recognizes such an expansion would require significant staff resources and appropriations but believes the need for expansion is necessary.

S. 681, the Deborah Sampson Act

The Deborah Sampson Act would support the VA's mission to adequately meet the needs of women veterans by: increasing peer-to-peer assistance, encouraging greater collaboration with community partners, expanding maternity and newborn care, eliminating existing barriers to care, and collecting and disseminating data specific to women veterans.

Since our nation's founding, and especially over the last 16 years, women have served in a variety of roles in our armed forces, but their service is often overlooked and their needs misunderstood by the VA and the American public. This March, Got Your 6 challenged the national narrative around women veterans by launching the PSA #ShesBadass to better illustrate the truly remarkable service of women.

According to VA data, women now total almost 11 percent of all veterans, including 20 percent of veterans under the age of 50, yet many people under appreciate their contributions and accomplishments. For example, after exiting the military, women veterans are more likely to attend and complete higher education degrees compared to their male veteran or civilian counterparts; have higher average incomes than non-veterans (\$54,000 vs. \$44,000); and are more likely to work in management roles and professions compared to their non-veteran counterparts. Women veterans are a force of



impactful change for our nation as a whole and empowering them to continue to do so only strengthens us all.

While our #ShesBadass campaign serves as a powerful tool in helping to reshape the way America views women veterans, there are still real challenges many women face when seeking care and benefits at the VA. Got Your 6 supports S. 681 as it reduces barriers to care and benefits and better equips the VA to address some of the challenges women continue to face. The veteran community's support of this legislation cannot be held in a vacuum; such transformational change will also require adequate appropriations and a continued commitment from VA leadership to make equity a priority.

However, better delivery of benefits and care by the VA should not be viewed as the only means to empower women veterans, and it risks excluding and further marginalizing those women who choose not to utilize the VA. We encourage this Committee to challenge their own views on women veterans, to seek out and highlight resources that empower women in their communities outside the VA, and leverage the amazing contributions women veterans are making to society across the country.

S. 804, the Women Veterans Access to Quality Care Act

The Women Veterans Access to Quality Care Act would require improvements to VA infrastructure, include women's health outcomes as a performance measure for VA medical center executives, mandate improved policies for environment of care inspections, and ensure greater access to Obstetricians-Gynecologists, among other provisions.

As stated above, Got Your 6 has been a leader in highlighting the strength of women veterans through our #ShesBadass campaign, but we also recognize the VA continues to have challenges in adequately meeting the needs of women veterans seeking care at VA facilities. We support S. 804 and the improvements to VA policies and infrastructure included in the bill that will address some of these deficiencies. Again, we reiterate that these changes cannot be accomplished without adequate resources and continued leadership on the issue across the VA enterprise.

S. 1024, Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act

The Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act would address many of the challenges experienced under the current disability claims appeals process by creating three routes for veterans to choose from if they want to appeal the initial decision made on a claim for VA benefits, allowing those veterans currently going through the appeals system to opt in to the new system, requiring the VA to test the new system before full implementation, and requiring the VA to submit a plan on full implementation of the new system and how it will process existing appeals.

Comprehensive appeals modernization is a long-standing priority of the veteran community. The current, antiquated system is under the burden of a significant backlog, which can often leave veterans waiting years for a decision. Eligibility for many of the empowering services and benefits offered by the



VA are tied to these appeals decisions, leaving some veterans in limbo. Additionally, the VA workforce can be more efficient in its operations under this new system, opening up resources and opportunities for greater efficiency in benefit delivery. Because of this, Got Your 6 supports this legislation and encourages Congress to finally address the VA's need for a modernized appeals process.

S. 1094, Department of Veterans Affairs Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act

This bill comprehensively addresses workforce management needs at the VA by shortening the removal process, ensuring removed employees are not kept on VA payroll while in the appeal process, and ensuring due process protections for whistleblowers, among other provisions.

The need to provide the VA Secretary greater workforce management flexibility has been frequently debated and discussed by many in the veteran community over the last three years. But, progress on enacting legislation to address this need has continuously stalled due to partisan gridlock and legitimate legal concerns over Constitutional workforce protections.

Got Your 6 is encouraged by the bipartisan nature of this bill and we support this legislation as a means to provide VA's leadership more efficient workforce management options. Our support being stated, we also call on leaders within this Committee to work with their counterparts in the House of Representatives to address any potential differences in intent and specific language, which has stalled movement on this issue for three years.

Draft, Serving our Rural Veterans Act

This bill would create a pilot program to cover the costs associated with medical residencies and internships in partnership with tribal health care facilities.

A shortage of health care providers, and mental health care providers in particular, is not a unique VA problem, it's an American problem. This shortage is felt even more acutely in our rural communities where recruitment and retention are especially difficult. The pilot program established in this legislation would help address some of these barriers by leveraging and expanding the existing partnership with tribal health care facilities and allows the VA to cover expenses of medical residencies at such facilities.

Got Your 6 supports this legislation as it encourages the VA to continue seeking ways to increase its operational efficiencies and its ability to successfully meet the needs of veterans regardless of their location. Additionally, this bill could serve the national population at-large by creating a lesson in best practices for ways the federal government can help address the overall provider shortage. We also encourage Congress to work with the VA to address any concerns related to the implementation and intent of the bill to ensure maximum impact and success of such a pilot program.



Draft, the Veteran Partners' Efforts to Enhance Reintegration Act

This bill would expand the VA's peer support model, currently used in mental health care, into the primary care setting.

Recognizing the importance of addressing common mental health care concerns in the primary care setting, the VA has begun to co-locate mental health care providers in the primary care setting. This supports the VA's unique ability to integrate services and reduce the burden of seeking multiple facets of care for veterans. However, peer support specialists, who we believe are integral, have yet to be integrated in a similar manner.

The VA's peer support program is directly aligned with the mission of Got Your 6: it aims to empower veterans with the tools necessary to successfully reintegrate fully into the community. Peer Specialists do this partly through storytelling and sharing their own paths to success. Got Your 6 believes storytelling is a powerful way to empower veterans, reduce the civilian-military divide, and destigmatize seeking help when needed and strongly supports this bill as a means to grow the peer support program at the VA to meet those objectives.

In conclusion, Got Your 6 -- through our 34 direct-impact, non-profit partners who collectively represent three million veterans and their families, as well as through our efforts to empower and challenge veterans when they return home -- are a new voice which represents all veterans, of all generations, of all backgrounds. We put veterans first and challenge them not to think of themselves as broken, but as the leaders our country is desperately searching for. The veteran empowerment movement is young, but it is already the voice of millions of veterans looking to challenge the status quo.

The veteran empowerment movement also addresses the majority of veterans who do not use the VA. Got Your 6 encourages this Committee to consider holding a topical hearing on community programs and veteran organizations currently meeting the needs of and empowering veterans outside the walls of VA facilities.

We would like to thank this committee for its leadership on veterans' issues and look forward to working together to empower all veterans.



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Biography of Lauren Augustine

Lauren Augustine is the Director of Government Relations at Got Your 6. After graduating from Virginia Tech, Ms. Augustine enlisted in the U.S. Army, quickly rising to the rank of sergeant, and served 12 months in Iraq with the First Infantry Division. Prior to joining Got Your 6, she was a Senior Legislative Associate for Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America and a Legislative Representative for the American Federation of Government Employees. In both positions she advocated on behalf of veterans, their families, and the services and benefits provided by the VA.

In recognition of her advocacy work, Ms. Augustine was named to the HillVets Top 100 in 2015 and awarded the Excellence by An Up and Coming Practitioner award from the Women in Professional Advocacy in 2016. She was also appointed to the Joint Leadership Council of Veteran Service Organizations for the Commonwealth of Virginia by Governor McAuliffe in 2016. In addition to her advocacy work, she proudly owns and operates a CrossFit gym in Northern Virginia alongside her husband.

Statement on Receipt of Grants or Contract Funds

Neither Ms. Augustine, nor the organization she represents, Got Your 6, has received federal grant or contract funds relevant to the subject matter of this testimony during the current or past two fiscal years.