

Introduction of VA Quality Employment Act of 2017

Senator Luther Strange – 11 July 2017

Thank you Mr. Chairman. Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Tester, I would first like to thank the Committee for its ongoing work to champion the interests of our nation's veterans.

There are a lot of issues that divide us these days, but taking care of those who have served must continue to be a unifying cause.

For so many Americans who have served, Veterans Administration employees are relied upon as the face of a promise the nation made to take care of them, and it is critical that VA facilities stand ready to meet the needs of our veteran population.

I'm here today to introduce a bill that will improve the quality of services and care available to veterans by implementing needed reforms to the VA hiring and employee management systems.

As members of this committee, you are each well aware of what we're up against in this effort. You know that a 2016 Best Places to Work survey ranked the VA second to last among large agencies, second to last in executive leadership, and dead last in pay.

It is vital that our veterans can count on high-quality services and care, and the first step in restoring that accountability is ensuring that the VA is equipped with talented professionals ready to meet their needs.

The VA Quality Employment Act of 2017 would build on the progress made by the VA Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act, which President Trump signed into law just last month. It would take a number of important additional steps to enable the agency to attract and retain top talent, hold poor performance accountable, and deliver services worthy of our nation's heroes:

First, it would establish healthcare and benefits fellowship programs connected to the private sector to train and retain a top-notch, service-oriented workforce. In today's evolving workforce, providing opportunities for professional development is a critical component in motivating talented caregivers and administrators to commit to the VA.

Second, the bill would provide for training human resource professionals on recruiting and retaining Veterans Health Administration employees and create a database of VA job openings. Too often, the right candidates are unaware of the opportunities that desperately need filling.

Third, it would direct the VA to conduct annual performance plans for political employees to ensure that the agency is in the hands of high-quality leadership. Veterans should never be subject to sub-par care because politics got in the way of public service.

In March, a companion bill, H.R. 1367, passed the House of Representatives unanimously by a vote of 412-0. The millions of veterans who rely on the VA deserve swift and decisive action in the Senate, as well.

I would like to urge my colleagues here today to recognize the need to improve the care we promise to those who protect our freedoms. Join me in support of legislation that will fill urgent needs and help the VA keep its covenant with our nation's heroes.

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member – thank you again for the courtesy you've extended in allowing me to speak today. I look forward to working with each of you to deliver this important bill for our nation's veterans.