

Statement for the Record
Senator Patty Murray
Committee Consideration of the Caring for our Veterans Act of 2017
Wednesday, November 29, 2017

Thank you, Chairman Isakson, and thank you, Ranking Member Tester.

As a voice for 600,000 veterans in my home state of Washington, and in honor of millions more veterans around the country, I'm so glad this Committee was able to come together to make progress for those who have bravely served our nation.

I know this wasn't an easy piece of legislation, it required a lot of give and take from both sides, but it's so important we keep finding common ground on behalf of our military families.

Most people in the room will recall that just a few years ago, Congress came together very quickly to pass the Choice Act in order to address urgent issues in the VA system. While the Choice Program had good intentions, it didn't take long to see there were significant problems with its implementation.

I know I certainly heard from veterans in Washington state who continued to run into problems accessing care, which is unacceptable.

Which brings us to this desperately-needed overhaul, and the point I really want to make, it is critical we get the Choice Program right and that we work to strengthen VA for the long-term.

Proper oversight and accountability will be key, which includes making sure VA is requesting a supplemental from Congress for the actual level of funding it needs to meet a number of the Secretary's commitments, such as improving care for veterans with Other Than Honorable discharges and paying the backlog of claims for emergency care, without taking money away from other vital VA programs.

It is incumbent upon members of this Committee to ensure we continually address problems as they come up, and that we continue to hold VA accountable to make sure that we always put veterans first.

I also want to highlight a provision in today's legislation that is critically important—and that is expanding the Caregivers program.

Over the years, I've met with a number of veterans and their caregivers who've impressed upon me how life-changing this program is. They have inspired me to fight for legislation to expand the program and I am thrilled Chairman Isakson and Ranking Member Tester have been so supportive of that effort. Although he's not in the room today, I also want to recognize VA Secretary Shulkin for his commitment to the Caregivers program.

In case you're not familiar with it, the program is all about recognizing the sacrifice of caregivers, often a spouse, family member or friend, who put their own lives on hold to care for a veteran with illness or injury.

We know these hidden heroes would do anything for their loved ones, no questions asked, but often they need help from our country when they need to take time off of work or when they start paying out of pocket to care for a veteran.

The Caregivers Program tells these hidden heroes, your country has got your back. It also tells our veterans that your country will help you get the care you need on your terms, whether that's at a VA facility or at home with a loved one.

This program is a proven success, but it's currently only available to post-9/11 veterans. The provision included in this legislation would expand the Caregivers program to veterans of all eras, which is a great step forward.

So again, I want to thank the Chairman and the Ranking Member for making this a priority, and I appreciate their help making sure this provision is included in the final bill agreed to with the House.

I look forward to working every member of this Committee to do everything possible to fulfill our promise to veterans and their families.

Thank you.