

SAL VA & R Commission December Article

Bipartisan support for legislation expanding caregiver benefits

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The American Legion and several other veterans service organizations (VSOs) recently delivered more than 180,000 signed petitions to Congress that urges lawmakers to pass bipartisan legislation that will expand caregiver benefits for all disabled veterans under the Department of Veterans Affairs Comprehensive Caregiver Assistance Program. The bill, which the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs passed on Nov. 29 by a 14-1 vote, would help improve existing health care and services provided under the VA by expanding eligibility for veterans of all generations, including Vietnam-era servicemembers. It would also provide permanent, streamlined access to health care and services with a new Veterans Community Care Program.

"Far too many veterans and their caregivers have been denied access to VA's comprehensive caregivers benefits for the wrong reason," said American Legion National Legislative Deputy Director Derek Fronabarger. "The American Legion believes eligibility for veterans' benefits should not be based on when a veteran served, but rather how they served and their physical and mental condition upon returning home."

"As the daughter of a World War II veteran who visits with veterans in my home state of Washington, I have seen firsthand the vital role that caregivers fulfill," said Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., a senior Senate VA committee member who is the bill's lead sponsor. "It is impossible to overstate the value of having a family member or a loved one, by your side, while overcoming an illness or coping with an injury."

"The sacrifice that many caregivers make to provide vital day-to-day care for our wounded veterans often goes unnoticed. Taking care of our veterans means taking care of the caregivers who help make their recovery possible."

Under VA's current Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers, only veterans who served on or after 9/11 are eligible for enhanced support. The Caring for Our Veterans Act seeks to provide caregiver benefits to veterans injured before May 7, 1975. Veterans who were injured between 1975 and 2001 would be eligible two years after this bill is enacted.

"We made a promise to care for our brave men and women when they return home from war – that includes supporting our caregivers," Murray said. "We cannot stop until we get this done."

Fronabarger said the nation should not and cannot treat veterans differently based only on their service. He said that withholding caregiver benefits of those who served before 9/11 is not giving them the respect and dignity they deserve.

"It is our hope to correct a serious flaw in the original caregiver legislation by removing the discriminatory barriers that prevent some of our nation's most deserving veterans, and their caregivers, from receiving the

comprehensive assistance they have earned,” he said. “The American Legion supports any responsible legislation that expands caregiver support to all veterans.”

The Caring for Our Veterans Act is now awaiting a vote in the full Senate. If passed, the bill would provide about \$4 billion for the Veterans Choice Fund and create standards for timely payment to community care providers.

“Often, caregivers put their lives on hold to provide full-time assistance to the veteran. This can take an immense toll on families, relationships, bank accounts and the health and well-being of caregivers,” said Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont., SVAC’s ranking member who introduced the bill. “We cannot rest easy until our efforts to expand the VA’s caregiver support program comes to fruition. Republicans, democrats and independents must continue to work together to get this legislation across the finish line and signed into law.”