

House Passes Veterans Bill Authored by Michaud

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Bill on Improving VA Substance Abuse Programs Passes along with a Package of Veterans Bills

WASHINGTON, DC - Today, Congressman Mike Michaud, Chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Health, praised a legislative package of bills which was considered on the House floor. Overall, the package includes bills to address the health care needs of veterans, authorize major medical facility construction projects, and provide a cost-of-living adjustment for service-connected disability compensation rates for veterans. Included in the package are two bills Michaud authored. One bill which passed unanimously would improve Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) substance abuse programs. The other bill, which will be voted on tomorrow, would authorize the building and leasing of medical facilities.

"As Memorial Day approaches, it is fitting that Congress move these important bills forward," said Michaud. "Our veterans have given up everything to defend the freedoms that we all enjoy, and they deserve the very best health care that our country can provide. Last year, this Congress passed a funding bill that provides the largest increase in veterans' health care in our nation's history. I am pleased that this year we are building on that progress."

H.R. 5554, the Justin Bailey Veterans Substance Use Disorders Prevention and Treatment Act, a bill which Michaud authored, would require the VA to provide the full continuum of care for substance use disorders, and it would require this full spectrum of care to be available at every VA medical center. The legislation also directs the VA to conduct a pilot program for internet-based substance use disorder treatment for veterans of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom.

"Over the past several years, Congress has increased funding for VA substance abuse treatment programs," said Michaud. "But substance abuse frequently co-occurs with other mental health conditions, and the need for services is increasing. VA needs to rededicate itself to providing comprehensive services that can address both substance abuse and other mental health conditions such as PTSD."

Of the approximately 300,000 veterans from Operations Enduring and Iraqi Freedom who have accessed VA health care, nearly 50,000 have been diagnosed with a substance use disorder. Additionally, more than 70% of homeless veterans suffer from alcohol and other drug abuse problems.

"The stigma associated with seeking treatment for mental health and substance use disorders has been demonstrated to prevent some veterans from seeking treatment," said Michaud. "The internet-based pilot program that this bill creates will help VA reach rural veterans who lack ready access to a medical facility. The committee realizes that substance use conditions are complex issues. As the chair of the Health Subcommittee, I will continue monitoring VA's efforts to reach those in most need."

The second bill that Michaud authored is H.R. 5856, the Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Facility Authorization and Lease Act. This bill, which will be voted on tomorrow, authorizes VA to build or lease major medical facilities across the country.

"The facilities authorized in this legislation will provide much needed access to physical and mental health care to our veterans," said Michaud. "The legislation also requires VA to report to Congress annually on the progress that they are making on the establishment of community-based outpatient clinics. These reporting requirements will help keep VA's feet to the fire on an issue especially important to our rural veterans who sometimes have to travel an entire day to get the care they need. VA needs to move the process along more quickly - it's been four years and only a handful of projects have been completed. Addressing the access issue for rural veterans remains a high priority for me and my subcommittee and we'll continue to monitor VA's progress."

A full list of veterans bills considered in the House today can be found below.

H.R. 2790, as amended - To amend title 38, United States Code, to establish the position of Director of Physician Assistant Services within the office of the Under Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Health.

H.R. 3819 - To amend title 38, United States Code, to require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to reimburse veterans receiving emergency treatment in non-Department of Veterans Affairs facilities for such treatment until such veterans are transferred to Department facilities, and for other purposes.

H.R. 5729 - To amend title 38, United States Code, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to provide comprehensive health care to children of Vietnam veterans born with Spina Bifida, and for other purposes.

H.R. 5554, as amended - To amend title 38, United States Code, to expand and improve health care services available to veterans from the Department of Veterans Affairs for substance use disorders, and for other purposes.

H.R. 5856 - To authorize major medical facility projects and major medical facility leases for the Department of Veterans Affairs for fiscal year 2009, and for other purposes.

H.R. 3681 - To amend title 38, United States Code, to authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to advertise in the national media to promote awareness of benefits under laws administered by the Secretary.

H.R. 3889, as amended - To amend title 38, United States Code, to require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to conduct a longitudinal study of the vocational rehabilitation programs administered by the Secretary.

H.R. 5664, as amended - To amend title 38, United States Code, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to update at least once every six years the plans and specifications for specially adapted housing furnished to veterans by the Secretary.

H.R. 5826 - To increase, effective as of December 1, 2008, the rates of disability compensation for veterans with service-connected disabilities and the rates of dependency and indemnity compensation for survivors of certain service-connected disabled veterans, and for other purposes.

H.R. 6048 - To amend the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act to provide for the protection of child custody arrangements for parents who are members of the Armed Forces deployed in support of a contingency operation.

