

Michaud Announces Passage of Important Package of Veterans Legislation Now Cleared for President's Signature

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WASHINGTON,

DC - Today, Congressman Mike Michaud, Chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Health, announced House passage of S. 2162, the Veterans' Mental Health and Other Care Improvements Act of 2008. S. 2162 contains a number of provisions that Michaud authored and passed through his subcommittee, including important provisions on substance use disorders, health care access improvements, and addressing homelessness among veterans. Passage of this bill today clears it for the president's signature.

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"The House Veterans Affairs' Committee has worked hard this session to pass a number of crucial pieces of legislation important to veterans," said Michaud. "While the Senate has largely been inactive in advancing many of these measures, I am pleased to see that in the end they combined much of my Subcommittee's work into this comprehensive package. These provisions will increase access to quality health care for all our veterans. It will make crucial updates to existing programs in addition to authorizing new and innovative ways to deliver care."

Included

in S. 2162, are provisions from the Rural Veterans Access to Care Act (H.R. 1527), which directs the Secretary of the VA to conduct a pilot program (which includes Maine) to permit certain highly rural veterans enrolled in the VA health system to receive covered health services through providers other than those of the VA.

Michaud's Subcommittee on Health held a legislative hearing on H.R. 1527 on April 26, 2007.

"As a cosponsor of the Rural Veterans Access to Care Act, I have worked closely with the sponsor in making sure that the provisions of this bill become a reality," said Michaud. "This pilot program includes the state of Maine and would allow a highly rural veteran who is enrolled in the VA system to elect to receive covered health services through a non-VA health care provider. This is a major step forward in our efforts to increase access to those veterans that live far from VA facilities."

Also

included in S. 2162 is the Justin Bailey Veterans Substance Use Disorders Prevention and Treatment Act (H.R. 5554), a bill Michaud authored, which 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 health care, including for substance abuse treatment programs," said Michaud. "But substance use disorders frequently co-occur 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. By passing this bill today, we are taking a huge step forward. This bill will improve health care for veterans everywhere and ensures that a full continuum of care is provided for substance use disorders at all VA medical centers.

Also

included in S. 2162, are provisions from the Homes for Heroes Act (H.R. 3329), which will provide shelter for homeless veterans and homeless veteran families, and help prevent low-income families from falling into homelessness. Michaud joined with Congressman Al Green (TX-09) in introducing the bill in August of last year.

"Today

Congress voted to give our homeless veterans a benefit they have earned - the promise of a home for themselves and their family," said Michaud. "This bill does more than merely bring to light the struggles that many veterans face. It provides tangible solutions so that veterans can get off the streets and get into sustainable housing. Passing these provisions means that more than 400,000 of our bravest Americans will be one step closer to being able to say they have a house to call their own."

Among

other provisions, S. 2162 directs the Secretary of the VA to carry out a program of research into PTSD and substance use disorder through the National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The bill also includes important assistance for families of veterans, such as marriage and family counseling. It also authorizes medical facility projects and major medical facility leases for Fiscal Year 2009.

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