

GENERAL LEAVE

Mr. TAKANO. Madam Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members may have 5 legislative days to revise and extend their remarks and insert extraneous material on H.R. 5918, as amended.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from California?

There was no objection.

Mr. TAKANO. Madam Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Madam Speaker, I rise today in support of H.R. 5918, as amended, legislation to ensure veterans can recoup the money they paid into the Montgomery GI Bill.

Under current law, veterans who do not fully access their Montgomery GI Bill can lose out on the payments they made into the program, in some cases totaling up to \$1,200.

The Montgomery GI Bill is in the process of being phased out for the more generous Forever GI Bill. Many veterans may not remember the \$1,200 they paid into the program in the early days of their service or even be aware that they are entitled to a refund of the unused funds.

The process to reclaim that \$1,200 can be difficult, and there are times when the veteran can simply lose out on the money because they waited too long. This legislation eliminates that cumbersome process by making it so the veteran is repaid, no questions asked.

The bill is fully offset and supported by the veterans service organization community, including by Student Veterans of America.

Madam Speaker, I thank the gentleman from Indiana (Mr. BANKS) for his work on this legislation and the VSO community for bringing this issue to our committee. I urge the rest of my colleagues to support this legislation to ensure no veteran loses out on what is owed to them.

Madam Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. BOST. Madam Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Madam Speaker, I rise today in support of H.R. 5918, as amended. This bill would close a financial loophole affecting many servicemembers.

Last Congress, I was proud to support General Bergman's efforts to responsibly sunset the Montgomery GI Bill, and today I am pleased to support Congressman BANKS' bill to ensure that those servicemembers who paid into the program are repaid.

Under current law, servicemembers who switch from Montgomery to the Post-9/11 GI Bill would lose about \$1,200 they paid into the program, if they exhausted their benefits while still on Active Duty. Veterans who exhaust their benefits already receive the \$1,200 back. This bill would fix this loophole and treat servicemembers and veterans equally.

Servicemembers earned the benefits and should not be shortchanged just

because they are still on Active Duty. This bill would include a short-term extension of the VA home loan funding fees to fully offset the cost of this bill.

Madam Speaker, I thank the American Legion for bringing this problem to our attention, and I also thank Congressman BANKS for introducing this important bill.

Madam Speaker, I urge my colleagues to support the bill, and I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. TAKANO. Madam Speaker, I ask all my colleagues to join me in passing H.R. 5918, as amended, and I yield back the balance of my time.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The question is on the motion offered by the gentleman from California (Mr. TAKANO) that the House suspend the rules and pass the bill, H.R. 5918, as amended.

The question was taken; and (two-thirds being in the affirmative) the rules were suspended and the bill, as amended, was passed.

The title of the bill was amended so as to read: "A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to ensure that the Secretary of Veterans Affairs repays members of the Armed Forces for certain contributions made by such members towards Post-9/11 Educational Assistance, and for other purposes."

A motion to reconsider was laid on the table.

REDUCE AND ELIMINATE MENTAL HEALTH OUTPATIENT VETERAN COPAYS ACT

Mr. TAKANO. Madam Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and pass the bill (H.R. 7589) to amend title 38, United States Code, to prohibit the imposition or collection of copayments for certain mental health outpatient care visits of veterans, and for other purposes, as amended.

The Clerk read the title of the bill.

The text of the bill is as follows:

H.R. 7589

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.

This Act may be cited as the "Reduce and Eliminate Mental Health Outpatient Veteran Copays Act" or the "REMOVE Copays Act".

SEC. 2. PROHIBITION ON COLLECTION OF COPAYMENTS FOR FIRST THREE MENTAL HEALTH CARE OUTPATIENT VISITS OF VETERANS.

(a) PROHIBITION ON COLLECTION.—Chapter 17 of title 38, United States Code, is amended by inserting after section 1722B the following new section (and conforming the table of sections at the beginning of such chapter accordingly):

"§ 1722C. Copayments: prohibition on collection of copayments for first three mental health care outpatient visits of veterans

"(a) PROHIBITION.—Except as provided in subsection (b), notwithstanding section 1710(g) of this title or any other provision of law, the Secretary may not impose or collect a copayment for the first three mental health care outpatient visits of a veteran in a calendar year for which the veteran would otherwise be required to pay a copayment

under the laws administered by the Secretary.

"(b) COPAYMENT FOR MEDICATIONS.—The prohibition under subsection (a) shall not apply with respect to the imposition or collection of copayments for medications pursuant to section 1722A of this title.

"(c) MENTAL HEALTH CARE OUTPATIENT VISIT DEFINED.—In this section, the term 'mental health care outpatient visit' means an outpatient visit with a qualified mental health professional for the primary purpose of seeking mental health care or treatment for substance abuse disorder."

(b) APPLICABILITY.—The amendments made by subsection (a) shall apply with respect to mental health care outpatient visits occurring on or after the date that is 180 days after the date of the enactment of this Act.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the rule, the gentleman from California (Mr. TAKANO) and the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. BOST) each will control 20 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from California.

GENERAL LEAVE

Mr. TAKANO. Madam Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members may have 5 legislative days in which to revise and extend their remarks and insert extraneous material on H.R. 7589, as amended.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from California?

There was no objection.

Mr. TAKANO. Madam Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Madam Speaker, as we all know, September is Suicide Prevention Awareness Month. I hope everyone has the new crisis hotline number, 988, saved on their phones. If you or a veteran you care about is in crisis, please dial 988, and press 1 to reach trained responders at the Veterans Crisis Line. Again, let me repeat the number. Dial 988 and press 1 to reach trained responders at the Veterans Crisis Line.

One component of a public health approach to veteran suicide prevention is ensuring that all of our Nation's heroes have access to timely, high-quality, effective mental health care.

Madam Speaker, I am so pleased to bring up my bill, H.R. 7589, as amended, the Reduce and Eliminate Mental Health Outpatient Veteran Copays or REMOVE Copays Act. We reported this bill favorably out of the Veterans' Affairs Committee last week on a bipartisan voice vote. I thank Ranking Member BOST for his support of this bill.

H.R. 7589 turns a legislative proposal from the Department of Veterans Affairs into a law that will make every enrolled veteran's first three outpatient mental health appointment at VA free every year. We know that what may seem like low copays can, in fact, be significant financial barriers for many veterans. Our goal is to knock down all barriers for veterans seeking and accessing mental health care at the VA.

□ 2015

VA strongly supports this bill, as do veterans service organizations and

mental health groups. If we can enact this into law, VA will be the first of hopefully all Federal healthcare programs to eliminate copays for mental health care every year in this way and get people the help they need.

Madam Speaker, I urge all of my colleagues to vote "yes" on this vital piece of legislation, H.R. 7589, as amended, the REMOVE Copays Act, and I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. BOST. Madam Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Madam Speaker, I rise in support of H.R. 7589, the REMOVE Copays Act. As its name suggests, this bill would remove copayments from every veteran's first three mental health outpatient visits for each calendar year.

I am pleased to support the REMOVE Copays Act today, and I hope it will encourage veterans to take better care of their mental health. September is Suicide Prevention Awareness Month, and according to the most recent data from the VA, the amount of veterans who died by suicide decreased from 2019 to 2020.

That is encouraging news. However, at least one non-VA study suggests that VA is undercounting the number of veterans who die by suicide by as much as 2.4 times. I fear that VA's data still has not accounted for the negative effects of COVID lockdowns, isolation, and illness.

Regardless, as long as veterans continue to take their own lives, we have important work to do. Suicide is not just a mental health issue. Improving mental health has a critical role to play in stopping suicide once and for all.

I am grateful to Chairman TAKANO for his introduction of this bill, and I hope all of my colleagues will join me in supporting it today.

Madam Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. TAKANO. Madam Speaker, I am prepared to close, and I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. BOST. Madam Speaker, I encourage all of my colleagues to support the bill, and I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. TAKANO. Madam Speaker, again, I ask all my colleagues to join me in passing H.R. 7589, as amended. I do thank my colleague, the ranking member. It is an example of standing our ground where we must and finding common ground where we can.

Lastly, I close by saying, please dial 988 and press 1 to reach trained responders at the Veterans Crisis Line.

Madam Speaker, I yield back the balance of my time.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The question is on the motion offered by the gentleman from California (Mr. TAKANO) that the House suspend the rules and pass the bill, H.R. 7589, as amended.

The question was taken; and (two-thirds being in the affirmative) the rules were suspended and the bill, as amended, was passed.

A motion to reconsider was laid on the table.

SOLID START ACT OF 2022

Mr. TAKANO. Madam Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and pass the bill (S. 1198) to amend title 38, United States Code, to improve and expand the Solid Start program of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.

The Clerk read the title of the bill.

The text of the bill is as follows:

S. 1198

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.

This Act may be cited as the "Solid Start Act of 2022".

SEC. 2. SOLID START PROGRAM OF THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS.

(a) IN GENERAL.—Chapter 63 of title 38, United States Code, is amended by adding at the end the following new subchapter:

"SUBCHAPTER II—OTHER OUTREACH PROGRAMS AND ACTIVITIES

"§ 6320. Solid Start program

"(a) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary shall carry out a program, to be known as the 'Solid Start program', under which the Secretary shall—

"(1) build the capacity of the Department to efficiently and effectively respond to the queries and needs of veterans who have recently separated from the Armed Forces; and

"(2) systemically integrate and coordinate efforts to assist veterans, including efforts—

"(A) to proactively reach out to newly separated veterans to inform them of their eligibility for programs and benefits provided by the Department; and

"(B) to connect veterans in crisis to resources that address their immediate needs.

"(b) ACTIVITIES OF THE SOLID START PROGRAM.—(1) The Secretary, in coordination with the Secretary of Defense, shall carry out the Solid Start program of the Department by—

"(A) collecting up-to-date contact information during transition classes or separation counseling for all members of the Armed Forces who are separating from the Armed Forces, while explaining the existence and purpose of the Solid Start program;

"(B) calling each veteran, regardless of separation type or characterization of service, three times within the first year after separation of the veteran from the Armed Forces;

"(C) providing information about the Solid Start program on the website of the Department and in materials of the Department, especially transition booklets and other resources;

"(D) ensuring calls are truly tailored to the needs of each veteran's unique situation by conducting quality assurance tests;

"(E) prioritizing outreach to veterans who have accessed mental health resources prior to separation from the Armed Forces;

"(F) providing women veterans with information that is tailored to their specific health care and benefit needs;

"(G) as feasible, providing information on access to State and local resources, including Vet Centers and veterans service organizations; and

"(H) gathering and analyzing data assessing the effectiveness of the Solid Start program.

"(2) The Secretary, in coordination with the Secretary of Defense, may carry out the Solid Start program by—

"(A) encouraging members of the Armed Forces who are transitioning to civilian life to authorize alternate points of contact who can be reached should the member be unavailable during the first year following the separation of the member from the Armed Forces; and

"(B) following up missed phone calls with tailored mailings to ensure the veteran still receives similar information.

"(3) In this subsection:

"(A) The term 'Vet Center' has the meaning given that term in section 1712A(h) of this title.

"(B) The term 'veterans service organization' means an organization recognized by the Secretary for the representation of veterans under section 5902 of this title."

(b) CONFORMING AMENDMENTS.—Chapter 63 of such title, as amended by subsection (a), is further amended—

(1) by inserting before section 6301 the following:

"Subchapter I—Outreach Services Program"; and

(2) in sections 6301, 6303, 6304, 6305, 6306, and 6307, by striking "this chapter" each place it appears and inserting "this subchapter".

(c) CLERICAL AMENDMENTS.—The table of sections at the beginning of chapter 63 of such title is amended—

(1) by inserting before the item relating to section 6301 the following new item:

"SUBCHAPTER I—OUTREACH SERVICES PROGRAM";

and

(2) by adding at the end the following new items:

"SUBCHAPTER II—OTHER OUTREACH PROGRAMS AND ACTIVITIES

"6320. Solid Start program."

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the rule, the gentleman from California (Mr. TAKANO) and the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. BOST) each will control 20 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from California.

GENERAL LEAVE

Mr. TAKANO. Madam Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members may have 5 legislative days in which to revise and extend their remarks and to insert extraneous material on S. 1198.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from California?

There was no objection.

Mr. TAKANO. Madam Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Madam Speaker, I rise to support S. 1198, the bipartisan, bicameral, Solid Start Act.

This bill is led by Senator HASSAN, and in the House, this legislative effort is led by my Veterans Affairs' Committee colleague, Representative SLOTKIN.

Now, we know that the transition from Active-Duty service to veteran status can bring not only new opportunities, but also substantial adjustment and stress. For some veterans, it can pose serious mental health challenges. In fact, the first year of transitioning out of military service is a very high-risk period for veteran suicide.

VA initiated its Solid Start program to address the challenges new veterans may face during this period. VA now