

Maternal mortality is an issue that continues to plague the United States health care system. In 2020, 861 women died of maternal causes in the United States. In the U.S., two-thirds of those pregnancy-related deaths are preventable and for every pregnancy-related death, there are 70 pregnancy-related near-death experiences. It's extremely important that we remove barriers in health care that may be contributing to these deaths.

Maternal mortality is caused by several issues such as cardiovascular problems, high blood pressure, blood clots, and complications of labor and delivery.

One step to removing health care barriers is to provide more services such as doulas who can advocate for the parent and provide positive birthing experiences.

From 2010 through 2015, the use of maternity services from the Veterans Health Administration increased by 44 percent.

If doula services are improving care for the general public, then veterans should be provided with the opportunity to utilize doula services as well.

A study in 2010 found that veterans returning from Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom who experienced pregnancy were twice as likely to have a diagnosis of depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder, bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia as compared to those who had not experienced a pregnancy.

H.R. 2521, Doula for VA Act of 2021 is important because we should be working to improve the lives of women and children in the United States. This bill directly impacts the health of veterans and their families.

I know that this bill is important to my constituents in Houston. Over 282,000 Veterans live in the Houston area, and almost 25,000 Veterans in Houston are women. Improving the birthing experience for these women is a top priority to me.

I encourage my colleagues to join me in supporting this critical bill that will direct the Department of Veterans Affairs to establish a pilot program to furnish doula services to veterans.

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. 2521, as amended.

The question was taken.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. In the opinion of the Chair, two-thirds being in the affirmative, the ayes have it.

Mrs. LAWRENCE. Mr. Speaker, on that I demand the yeas and nays.

The yeas and nays were ordered.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to clause 8 of rule XX, further proceedings on this motion will be postponed.

COMMITMENT TO VETERAN SUPPORT AND OUTREACH ACT

Mr. TAKANO. Mr. Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and pass the bill (H.R. 4601) to amend title 38, United States Code, to authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to award grants to States to improve outreach to 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. 4601

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 "Commitment to Veteran Support and Outreach Act".

SEC. 2. AUTHORITY FOR SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS TO AWARD GRANTS TO STATES AND INDIAN TRIBES TO IMPROVE OUTREACH TO VETERANS.

(a) IN GENERAL.—Chapter 63 of title 38, United States Code, is amended—

(1) by redesignating sections 6307 and 6308 and sections 6308 and 6309, respectively; and

(2) by inserting after section 6306 the following new section 6307:

"§ 6307. Grants to States and Indian Tribes to improve outreach to veterans

"(a) PURPOSE.—It is the purpose of this section to provide for assistance by the Secretary to States and Indian Tribes to carry out programs that—

"(1) improve outreach and assistance to veterans and the spouses, children, and parents of veterans, to ensure that such individuals are fully informed about any veterans and veterans-related benefits and programs (including veterans programs of a State or Indian Tribe) for which they may be eligible; and

"(2) facilitate opportunities for such individuals to receive competent, qualified services in the preparation, presentation, and prosecution of veterans benefits claims.

"(b) AUTHORITY.—The Secretary may award grants under this section to States and Indian Tribes—

"(1) to carry out, coordinate, improve, or otherwise enhance outreach activities;

"(2) to increase the number of county or Tribal veterans service officers serving in the State or Indian Tribe by hiring new, additional such officers; or

"(3) to expand, carry out, coordinate, improve, or otherwise enhance existing programs, activities, and services of the existing organization of the State or Indian Tribe that has been recognized by the Department of Veterans Affairs pursuant to section 5902, in the preparation, presentation, and prosecution of claims for veterans benefits through representatives who hold positions as county or Tribal veterans service officers.

"(c) APPLICATION.—(1) To be eligible for a grant under this section, a State or Indian Tribe shall submit to the Secretary an application therefor at such time, in such manner, and containing such information as the Secretary may require.

"(2) Each application submitted under paragraph (1) shall include the following:

"(A) A detailed plan for the use of the grant.

"(B) A description of the programs through which the State or Indian Tribe will meet the outcome measures developed by the Secretary under subsection (i).

"(C) A description of how the State or Indian Tribe will distribute grant amounts equitably among counties (or Tribal lands, as the case may be) with varying levels of urbanization.

"(D) A plan for how the grant will be used to meet the unique needs of American Indian or Alaska Native veterans, elderly veterans, women veterans, and veterans from other underserved communities.

"(d) DISTRIBUTION.—The Secretary shall seek to ensure that grants awarded under this section are equitably distributed among States and Indian Tribes with varying levels of urbanization.

"(e) PRIORITY.—The Secretary shall prioritize awarding grants under this section that will serve the following areas:

"(1) Areas with a critical shortage of county or Tribal veterans service officers.

"(2) Areas with high rates of—

"(A) suicide among veterans; or

"(B) referrals to the Veterans Crisis Line.

"(f) USE OF COUNTY OR TRIBAL VETERANS SERVICE OFFICERS.—A State or Indian Tribe that receives a grant under this section to carry out an activity described in subsection (b)(1) may only carry out the activity through—

"(1) a county or Tribal veterans service officer of the State or Indian Tribe; or

"(2) if the State or Indian Tribe does not have a county or Tribal veterans service officer, or if the county or Tribal veterans service officers of the State or Indian Tribe cover only a portion of that State or Indian Tribe, an appropriate entity of a State, local, or Tribal government, as determined by the Secretary.

"(g) REQUIRED ACTIVITIES.—Any grant awarded under this section shall be used—

"(1) to expand existing programs, activities, and services;

"(2) to hire and maintain new, additional county or Tribal veterans service officers; or

"(3) for travel and transportation to facilitate carrying out paragraph (1) or (2).

"(h) OTHER PERMISSIBLE ACTIVITIES.—A grant under this section may be used to provide education and training, including on-the-job training, for State, county, local, and Tribal government employees who provide (or when trained will provide) veterans outreach services in order for those employees to obtain and maintain accreditation in accordance with procedures approved by the Secretary.

"(i) OUTCOME MEASURES.—(1) The Secretary shall develop and provide to each State or Indian Tribe that receives a grant under this section written guidance on the following:

"(A) Outcome measures.

"(B) Policies of the Department.

"(2) In developing outcome measures under paragraph (1), the Secretary shall consider the following goals:

"(A) Increasing the use of veterans and veterans-related benefits, particularly among vulnerable populations.

"(B) Increasing the number of county and Tribal veterans service officers recognized by the Secretary for the representation of veterans under chapter 59 of this title.

"(j) TRACKING REQUIREMENTS.—(1) With respect to each grant awarded under this section, the Secretary shall track the use of veterans benefits among the population served by the grant, including the average period of time between the date on which a veteran or other eligible claimant applies for such a benefit and the date on which the veteran or other eligible claimant receives the benefit, disaggregated by type of benefit.

"(2) Not less frequently than annually during the life of the grant program established under this section, the Secretary shall submit to Congress a report on—

"(A) the information tracked under paragraph (1);

"(B) how the grants awarded under this section serve the unique needs of American Indian or Alaska Native veterans, elderly veterans, women veterans, and veterans from other underserved communities; and

"(C) other information provided by States and Indian Tribes pursuant to the grant reporting requirements.

"(k) PERFORMANCE REVIEW.—(1) The Secretary shall—

"(A) review the performance of each State or Indian Tribe that receives a grant under this section; and

"(B) make information regarding such performance publicly available.

"(l) REMEDIATION PLAN.—(1) In the case of a State or Indian Tribe that receives a grant

under this section and does not meet the outcome measures developed by the Secretary under subsection (i), the Secretary shall require the State or Indian Tribe to submit a remediation plan under which the State or Indian Tribe shall describe how and when it plans to meet such outcome measures.

“(2) The Secretary may not award a subsequent grant under this section to a State or Indian Tribe described in paragraph (1) unless the Secretary approves the remediation plan submitted by the State or Indian Tribe.

“(m) MAXIMUM AMOUNT.—The amount of a grant awarded under this section may not exceed 10 percent of amounts made available for grants under this section for the fiscal year in which the grant is awarded.

“(n) SUPPLEMENT, NOT SUPPLANT.—Any grant awarded under this section shall be used to supplement and not supplant State and local funding that is otherwise available.

“(o) DEFINITIONS.—In this section:

“(1) The term ‘county or Tribal veterans service officer’ includes a local equivalent veterans service officer.

“(2) The term ‘Indian Tribe’ has the meaning given such term in section 4 of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (25 U.S.C. 5304).

“(3) The term ‘State’ includes the District of Columbia, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and any territory or possession of the United States.

“(4) The term ‘Veterans Crisis Line’ means the toll-free hotline for veterans established under section 1720F(h) of this title.”

(b) CLERICAL AMENDMENT.—The table of sections at the beginning of chapter 63 of such title is amended by striking the items relating to sections 6307 and 6308 and inserting the following new items:

“6307. Grants to States and Indian Tribes to improve outreach to veterans.

“6308. Outreach for eligible dependents.

“6309. Biennial report to Congress.”

(c) MODIFICATION OF CERTAIN HOUSING LOAN FEE.—The loan fee table in section 3729(b)(2) of title 38, United States Code, is amended by striking “January 14, 2031” each place it appears and inserting “February 10, 2031”.

(d) AUTHORIZATION OF ADDITIONAL FULL-TIME EQUIVALENT EMPLOYEE.—During fiscal years 2024 through 2028, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs may hire two or more additional full-time equivalent employees in the Office of the General Counsel of the Department of Veterans Affairs, as compared to the number of full-time equivalent employees that would otherwise be authorized for such office, to carry out duties under the accreditation, discipline, and fees program.

SEC. 3. DETERMINATION OF BUDGETARY EFFECTS.

The budgetary effects of this Act, for the purpose of complying with the Statutory Pay-As-You-Go Act of 2010, shall be determined by reference to the latest statement titled “Budgetary Effects of PAYGO Legislation” for this Act, submitted for printing in the Congressional Record by the Chairman of the House Budget Committee, provided that such statement has been submitted prior to the vote on passage.

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. Mr. 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. 4601, as amended.

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

There was no objection.

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

Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of H.R. 4601, the Commitment to Veteran Support and Outreach Act, as amended. This bill authorizes VA to provide grants to States, counties, and Tribes to implement programs that improve outreach and assistance to veterans and their families to ensure that such individuals are fully informed about veterans' benefits and programs.

Specifically, VA may provide grants to States, counties, and Tribal entities to implement or enhance outreach activities or activities to assist in the development and submittal of claims for veterans or increase the number of county or Tribal veteran service officers in the State.

Additionally, VA would be required to prioritize awarding grants in areas with a critical shortage of county or Tribal veterans service officers, areas with high rates of suicide among veterans, and areas with high rates of referrals to the veterans crisis line.

With high-profile, sweeping veterans' legislation like the PACT Act recently signed into law, the support and outreach offered by H.R. 4601 would greatly assist in implementing such new programs as smoothly as possible.

With enhanced communication outreach focused on explaining new benefits and services to a broader range of veterans and their families, the more opportunities we will have to connect with potential beneficiaries interacting with VA for the very first time.

With more accredited claims representatives available to assist with the preparation and submission of claim applications, the better positioned VA will be to decide these claims in a more timely and accurate manner.

With funds to recruit and train more county and Tribal veterans service officers, helpful skills and information related to life-changing benefits and other VA services will reach farther into our veteran communities that are so often and undeservedly overlooked.

Mr. Speaker, I wholeheartedly support this bill. I thank Representative LEVIN for crafting this important legislation. I urge my colleagues to vote for its passage, and I reserve the balance of my time.

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

Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of H.R. 4601, as amended, the Commitment to Veteran Support and Outreach Act.

This bill would provide VA the authority to award grants to States and Indian Tribes to improve outreach to veterans and their families about the benefits they may be eligible for.

H.R. 4601, as amended, would prioritize grants to the areas that have large populations of underserved veterans and high rates of suicide. Additionally, this bill would help county and Tribal VSOs assist veterans with preparing and presenting their disability compensation claims.

With the implementation of the PACT Act right around the corner, it is imperative that Congress provide local VSOs with the resources they need to assist veterans with their claims.

Every veteran deserves access to the same wraparound help with their benefits regardless of where they live. Congressman LEVIN and Congressman ROSENDALE's proposal would do exactly that.

I also want to point out that this bill has a mandatory cost because of toxic exposure funds created by the PACT Act. Now, I am happy to see the cost is now fully offset rather than swept under the rug.

Congress must find a permanent solution to the toxic exposure fund scoring problem before we use up all of our offsets and become unable to move additional legislation.

Mr. Speaker, I encourage all my colleagues to work toward that solution, and I urge all Members to support H.R. 4601, as amended.

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

Mr. TAKANO. Mr. Speaker, again, I ask all my colleagues to join me in passing H.R. 4601, as amended. I yield back the balance of my time.

Ms. JACKSON LEE. Mr. Speaker, I proudly stand in strong support of H.R. 4601, the Commitment to Veteran Support and Outreach Act, which will authorize the VA to provide grants to states to implement programs that improve outreach and assistance to veterans and their families to ensure that such individuals are fully informed about veterans' benefits and programs.

As our veterans have put their lives on the line for defense of our nation, we must do everything in our power to support them when they return home after their service.

This bill achieves this goal by increasing outreach to veterans and their families to ensure that they are fully informed about their benefits and can get the assistance they need to apply for and get the benefits to which they are entitled.

According to a report by the Department of Veterans Affairs, America has over 19 million veterans, of whom over 1,567,000 live in Texas, the second most of any state. Over 179,000 live in Harris County and about 29,000 live in my district.

Of the total veteran population, the VA reports that only 49% (9.8 million out of 20.0 million) used at least one VA benefit or service in FY 2017.

That percentage is far too low. Too few veterans are taking advantage of the programs and services available to them to cope with the ravages of war.

Their ailments include everything from respiratory problems caused by burn-pit toxic exposure to combat conditions such as Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Prompt and easy access to services to address these problems determines a veteran's ability to recover from them.

For example, according to research conducted by the VA, veterans who received care soon after the end of their service had lower levels of PTSD upon a follow-up evaluation a year after they initiated care. According to the study, for each year that a veteran waited to initiate treatment, there was about a 5 percent increase in the odds of their PTSD either not improving or worsening.

In 2018, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine found that post-9/11 veterans who had not sought VA mental health care didn't know how to apply for benefits—or were unsure whether they were even eligible. Some didn't know what services the VA offered or felt that they didn't deserve care even if they could get it.

This bill addresses that problem by making grants available to states to help the thousands of veterans who need services for their conditions acquired or exacerbated by military service but who don't know how to access them.

This legislation will not only be key to assisting veterans to get over barriers to access their benefits but will also improve veteran mental health and help reduce the veteran suicide crisis.

This bill focuses on equity by prioritizing grants to areas with high suicide rates among veterans and high referrals to the Veterans Crisis Line. This approach will help save veterans' lives and ensure this funding is directed to areas most in need.

Smoother access to VA mental health care and suicide prevention has never been more important than it is today. A disproportionate number of veterans die by suicide following separation from military service.

Veterans ages 18 to 34 have the highest rate of suicide.

As reported by the Houston Chronicle, in 2020, the suicide rate for Texas veterans was 36.6 suicides per 100,000 veterans while the nationwide rate was 34.4, according to data from the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs. This rate is in stark contrast to the suicide rate among Texans overall, which is 13.3 per 100,000 people.

I am proud to support this legislation because it will reduce veteran suicide among Texans and nationwide, and it will enable states to better serve veterans who are in need of many types of assistance.

This is especially important because of the Texas governor's recent actions impacting troops and veterans in Texas with regard to the southern border.

Texas's governor has thrust our National Guard into a disastrous border operation, Operation Lone Star, by declaring a fictional "migrant invasion", and falsely claiming that activation of the National Guard is needed for what he describes as "secure our communities against record-breaking illegal border crossings and transnational criminal activity."

The result is that our National Guard troops are being forced to commit major human rights violations. The governor's use of the National Guard to police misdemeanor trespassing by migrants has sparked a civil rights probe by the Justice Department. According to Human Rights Watch, the operation results in arrests that target people based on race and national origin and disregard due process, including abuses in detention.

Black and Brown migrants, and even US citizens, are subjected to racially discriminatory arrests, prosecutions on flimsy pretenses, and detention with substandard food and inadequate or nonexistent health care, according to detainees cited in a complaint filed with the US Justice Department. Defendants have been forced to wait weeks or months in pre-trial detention before they have an opportunity to see a judge.

Troops commanded to carry out this operation are so affected that at least four confirmed suicides have occurred since the operation began, while ten soldiers linked to the operation have died since September 2021, all via accident or suicide.

In addition to human rights abuses, Texas Guard troops have complained about pay problems, poor living conditions and inconsistent guidance from leaders since the operation expanded massively last Fall.

I strongly denounce the program, its abuses, and the trauma that it is inflicting on our troops who are charged to carry out the program's edicts.

This legislation, H.R. 4601, will help these veterans who struggle with the aftermath of the psychological and physical toll of serving on this operation, just as veterans of combat in Afghanistan and Iraq and elsewhere continue to wrestle with the aftereffects of their service.

We must help veterans access the benefits and services that they earned and so definitely deserve.

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. 4601, as amended.

The question was taken.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. In the opinion of the Chair, two-thirds being in the affirmative, the ayes have it.

Mr. GOOD of Virginia. Mr. Speaker, on that I demand the yeas and nays.

The yeas and nays were ordered.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to clause 8 of rule XX, further proceedings on this motion will be postponed.

□ 1430

MARK O'BRIEN VA CLOTHING ALLOWANCE IMPROVEMENT ACT

Mr. TAKANO. Mr. Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and pass the bill (H.R. 4772) to amend title 38, United States Code, to improve the application and review process of the Department of Veterans Affairs for clothing allowance claims submitted by 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. 4772

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 "Mark O'Brien VA Clothing Allowance Improvement Act".

SEC. 2. IMPROVEMENTS TO PROCESS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS FOR CLOTHING ALLOWANCE CLAIMS.

(a) PROCESS FOR CLOTHING ALLOWANCE CLAIMS.—Section 1162 of title 38, United States Code, is amended—

(1) by striking "The Secretary under" and inserting:

"(a) ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS.—The Secretary, under";

(2) in paragraph (2)—

(A) by striking "which (A) a physician" and inserting: "which—"

"(A) a physician"; and

(B) by striking "and (B) the Secretary" and inserting "and"; and

"(B) the Secretary"; and

(3) by adding at the end the following new subsections:

"(b) CONTINUOUS NATURE OF PAYMENTS.—Payments made to a veteran under subsection (a) shall continue on an automatically recurring annual basis until the earlier of the following:

"(1) The date on which the veteran elects to no longer receive such payments.

"(2) The date on which the Secretary determines the veteran no longer eligible pursuant to subsection (d).

"(c) REVIEWS OF CLAIM.—(1) Except as provided in paragraph (2)(B), the Secretary shall conduct reviews of the claim on which the clothing allowance is based to determine the continued eligibility of the veteran as follows:

"(A) Beginning not earlier than five years after the date on which a veteran initially receives a clothing allowance under this section and on a periodic basis thereafter.

"(B) Whenever the Secretary receives notice that the veteran no longer meets the requirements specified in subsection (a).

"(2)(A) The Secretary shall prescribe in regulations standards for determining whether a claim for clothing allowance is based on a circumstance that is not subject to change.

"(B) If the Secretary determines, pursuant to such standards, that a claim for clothing allowance is based on a circumstance that is not subject to change, paragraph (1)(A) shall not apply with respect to the claim.

"(d) DETERMINATION REGARDING CONTINUED ELIGIBILITY.—If the Secretary determines, as the result of a review of a claim conducted under subsection (c)(1), that the veteran who submitted such claim no longer meets the requirements specified in subsection (a), the Secretary shall—

"(1) provide to the veteran notice of such determination that includes a description of applicable actions that may be taken following the determination, including the actions specified in section 5104C of this title; and

"(2) discontinue the clothing allowance based on such claim."

(b) APPLICABILITY.—The amendments made by subsection (a) shall apply with respect to—

(1) claims for clothing allowance submitted on or after the date of the enactment of this Act; and

(2) claims for clothing allowance submitted prior to the date of the enactment of this Act, if the veteran who submitted such claim is in receipt of the clothing allowance as of the date of the enactment of this Act.

SEC. 3. ADJUSTMENTS OF CERTAIN LOAN FEES.

The loan fee table in section 3729(b)(2) of title 38, United States Code, is amended by striking "January 14, 2031" each place it appears and inserting "January 15, 2031".

SEC. 4. DETERMINATION OF BUDGETARY EFFECTS.

The budgetary effects of this Act, for the purpose of complying with the Statutory