

Amendment ____ Eliminate excessive wait times for health care and the benefits claims backlog before creating new or expanding existing programs

S. 1982 fails to address the real problems facing the Department of Veterans Affairs or the veterans they serve because it creates additional burdens on the VA system while it ignores the reality that the current care the VA is providing to our veterans is literally killing them.

This amendment ensures we fulfill our current obligations to our veterans before we promise any new benefits.

Specifically, the amendment prohibits the VA from implementing any of the at least 15 new or expanded programs created in the underlying bill until the Comptroller General certifies to Congress that the VA is on track to meet certain metrics included in their Performance and Accountability Report of 2013.

This amendment is intended to ensure we do not overburden the existing system with new mandates until the VA can assure us the existing targets used to monitor, assess, and report on progress toward goals, such as reduced wait lines, reduced disability backlog, and an increase in the quality of medical care are being met.

For example, one of these simple metrics the VA should be able to meet is that new medical appointments must occur within 14 days. Our veterans should not have to wait more than 14 days to receive an initial doctor's appointment. Yet, in 2013, only 41 percent of new primary care appointments for our veterans were completed within 14 days of when the appointment was scheduled. In other words, 60 percent of all new appointments require veterans to wait more than two weeks to see the doctor.

Until the VA certifies they are meeting this goal, it is irresponsible for Congress to load them up with more responsibility they clearly will fail to meet.

We are unable to fulfill our *current* promises to the brave men and women who answered our nation's call and fought selflessly for our freedoms.

It is shameful for Congress to claim credit for providing new benefits while old promises are forgotten and substandard care is literally resulting in the deaths of our heroes.

Delays in Medical Care Resulting in Veteran Deaths

The lives of military veterans may be more at risk inside a VA hospital than they were while fighting on a battlefield overseas.

A recent CNN investigation revealed dozens of veterans have died or are suffering at the hands of the VA, while thousands more wait months to receive basic medical care.

For example, at least 19 veterans have died as a result of delayed diagnosis or treatment for colonoscopies or endoscopies at VA hospitals.

82 vets who have died or are dying or have suffered serious injuries as a result of delayed diagnosis or treatment for colonoscopies or endoscopies.

More than 20 veterans are dead or dying of cancer “because they had to wait too long for diagnosis or treatment” at a VA facility in South Carolina.

The deaths of three veterans at a VA facility in Georgia were caused by delays in care.

In total, 5,100 veterans in need of gastrointestinal procedures went without consultations between 2011 and 2012 in Georgia.

These included a delay in 2,860 screenings, 1,300 surveillance and 340 diagnostic endoscopies.

In the Florida region, five veterans are dead, and 14 vets or their families were sent disclosures that they suffered "adverse events" because of delayed or denied care or diagnosis.

In the Rocky Mountain region, two veterans died, and four families were sent the disclosures or notified

In the Texas region, seven vets or their families were sent disclosures about adverse events and serious injuries suffered because of delayed care.

Approximately 22 veterans commit suicide every day, yet most veterans waiting more than two weeks for first-time psychiatric therapy appointments in 2013. In one Houston, Texas, the wait was an average of 28 days.

While hardly the kind of medical care worth waiting around to receive, that's exactly what thousands of veterans must do every week.

The VA Does Not Know How Long the Wait Lines Are

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) has been reporting on these wait lines for more than ten years. "It is unclear how long veterans are waiting to receive care in VA's medical facilities because the reported data are unreliable," GAO health care director Debra Draper said, while also acknowledging the VA has even tried to cover up the wait times.

GAO analysts found more than half of the VA's 50,000 schedulers did not know how to accurately report the information needed to determine wait times, which includes logging the date a veteran wants to be seen as well as the actual date of the appointment. Others admitted to changing the desired date so the time aligned with VA's established goal of 14 days.

VA Employees Destroyed Veterans' Medical Records to Cover Up Backlog

Just this week, press reports reveal employees of the VA destroyed the medical records of veterans, in an effort to eliminate the backlog of requests for medical appointments.

According to the Daily Caller, an audio recording of an internal VA meeting “confirms that VA officials in Los Angeles intentionally canceled backlogged patient exam requests.” VA employees were instructed by the VA staff to cancel all pending appointments over one year old.

A former employee of the LA VA Center and Marine veteran, Oliver Mitchell, explained to the paper, “We just didn’t have the resources to conduct all of those exams. Basically we would get about 3,000 requests a month for [medical] exams, but in a 30-day period we only had the resources to do about 800.” As of 2008, some patients were “waiting six to nine months for an exam.”

Disability Benefit Claims Take More than A Year to Process

It takes an average of 376 days for the VA to process veterans’ disability benefit claims.¹

In Cleveland, Ohio, it takes an average of 464 days for the VA to process veterans’ disability benefit claims.²

About 400,000 veterans are waiting more than 125 days for a decision on requests for disability compensation.³

There are approximately 34,000 veterans who have been waiting for a year or longer on requests for disability compensation.⁴

Veterans in Nevada wait longer than those in any other state to have disability benefits claims completed. As of December, 4,000 Nevada

¹ Sarah Buduson, “U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Cleveland office one of slowest for processing disability claims,” newsnet5.com, October 2, 2013; <http://www.newsnet5.com/news/local-news/investigations/us-department-of-veterans-affairs-cleveland-office-one-of-slowest-for-processing-disability-claims> .

² Sarah Buduson, “U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Cleveland office one of slowest for processing disability claims,” newsnet5.com, October 2, 2013; <http://www.newsnet5.com/news/local-news/investigations/us-department-of-veterans-affairs-cleveland-office-one-of-slowest-for-processing-disability-claims> .

³ Kevin Freking, “Vets groups oppose proposal to alter disability filing rules,” Associated Press, January 12, 2014; http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/national_world/2014/01/12/vets-groups-oppose-proposal-to-alter-disability-filing-rules.html .

⁴ Aaron Glantz, “Overtime, new computer system put sizable dent in VA benefits backlog,” The Center for Investigative Reporting, November 11, 2013; <http://cironline.org/reports/overtime-new-computer-system-put-sizable-dent-va-benefits-backlog-5514> .

veterans had been waiting more than 125 days for completion of their claims.⁵

The Senate is Being Irresponsible by Promising New Benefits We Will Be Unable to Provide

It seems malfeasance at the VA is matched only by that of the Senate.

American heroes are being abused by the government run health care system created just for them.

Congress has known for over two years of the chronic delays in veteran's health care service, and even appropriated funds to address it. Yet, CNN found only one third of the \$1 million appropriated to address the issue were actually used for this purpose.

The medical malpractice perpetrated on our national heroes, while Congress looks the other way, is enough to make anyone sick.

This amendment requires the VA to keep its current promises before we overload them with new responsibilities.

The bill provides this extensive slew of new and expanded health care services for veterans, all the while, the VA is unable to meet the demands of the current covered population.

The legislation also includes a provision nearly tripling the number of veterans eligible to receive this already lousy health care.

The bill promises to expand many veterans' health care and education services and benefits provided by the VA, creating at least 15 new programs and expanding many more.

⁵ Keith Rogers, "Heller: Nevada veterans have longest wait for VA benefits," Las Vegas Review-Journal, December 11, 2013; <http://www.reviewjournal.com/news/heller-nevada-veterans-have-longest-wait-va-benefits> .

The following examples are just some of these provisions, which should not be implemented until the existing backlog is eradicated and the VA begins to meet the standards of quality care in a timely manner.

New, Duplicative Website. Creates a new, online employment portal containing information regarding all federal programs and activities concerning employment, unemployment and training resources for veterans. This new site largely duplicates the VA's Veterans Information Portal, which links to information about both benefits and services. The bill also then requires the Department of Labor (DOL) to compile a list of Internet websites and applications that are beneficial for veterans in pursuit of employment, and requires DOL to report on the feasibility and advisability of creating a single, unified, employment portal.

Fitness Centers for the Obese. Directs VA to subsidize fitness center membership for overweight or obese veterans who reside more than 15 minutes driving distance from a VA fitness facility.

New Healthy Weight Program. Requires VA to carry out a three-year program to assess the feasibility and advisability of promoting the achievement of a healthy weight in veterans enrolled in VA health care through the designation of VA fitness facilities within VA medical centers and clinics.

Marriage Counseling. Directs VA to include education and training of marriage and family therapists, as well as licensed professional mental health counselors. However, the VA is already failing to provide adequate mental health services to combat veterans. Additionally, extensive counseling services, including marriage counseling, are already made available to service members.

Additional Counseling Benefits. The bill makes permanent a program to provide reintegration and readjustment counseling in retreat settings to newly separated women veterans. Female veterans do not face unique challenges reintegrating and readjusting to civilian life, and VA should limit such services to service members who suffered combat or service-related injuries. Furthermore, there are private organizations that perform this service free of charge for veterans.

Yet, the bill does not provide adequate support to meet the demands of *existing* programs and ignores ongoing failings of the current VA structure.

The legislation not only fails to acknowledge their disintegrating health care system, but in fact will make it worse. It includes a provision nearly tripling the number of veterans eligible to receive this already lousy health care.

This will only overburden the system even more and continue the denied care to those service men and women literally dying while they wait.