

The VA MISSION Act (S. 2372)

On May 23, 2018, America's veterans, their families and caregivers had a big victory in Congress when the Senate voted overwhelmingly -- 92 to 5 -- to approve the VA MISSION Act, which already passed the House last week. Once signed into law by the President, this historic legislation will expand support to veteran caregivers of ALL eras as well as improve veterans' access to and quality of care, top priorities that DAV has worked for years to accomplish.

The VA MISSION Act (S. 2372) will extend eligibility for VA's comprehensive caregiver assistance program to ALL generations of seriously injured veterans. Currently, VA offers full caregiver benefits only for veterans injured on or after September 11, 2001, leaving family caregivers of veterans injured in earlier conflicts and eras ineligible for this critical support. The new law will require that VA first update the caregiver program's IT system to handle the expanded number of eligible veterans and caregivers, and then extends eligibility to veterans from the Vietnam, Korean and World War II eras. Two years later, eligibility will be phased in for veterans injured between 1975 and 2001, including those hurt during the Gulf War. This legislation represents a huge leap forward in supporting veteran caregivers; however, DAV will not rest until every deserving veteran and caregiver has equitable access to these life-changing benefits.

The VA MISSION Act also contains dozens of provisions to expand access, improve quality and strengthen the VA health care system for all enrolled veterans. The bill reforms VA's Choice and community care programs by requiring the development of integrated health care networks, with VA remaining the coordinator and primary provider of care for enrolled veterans. The current Choice program would sunset after one year and qualified community providers would then be able to participate in VA's integrated networks when VA determines it necessary to fill access gaps so veterans don't have to wait too long or travel too far for the care they have earned.

The VA MISSION Act also requires the development of a long-term plan to modernize, properly align and fund VA's health care facilities to meet the future needs of

veterans. The bill's Asset and Infrastructure Review represents a compromise that provides significant checks and balances by Congress, the Administration and outside veteran stakeholders. During congressional consideration of this section of the bill, DAV and other VSOs proposed more than two dozen specific changes that were ultimately accepted to ensure that veterans' needs and preferences remain central to this process.

The VA MISSION Act contains a number of provisions to improve VA's ability to recruit, hire and retain high-quality doctors, nurses and other clinical staff, such as new incentive bonuses, scholarships and education loan repayment programs. The bill makes critical improvements to VA's telehealth policies to expand access for rural and remote veterans, and also includes language to support VA's efforts to prevent unnecessary use or abuse of opioids.

The VA MISSION Act was developed and introduced by House Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Phil Roe (TN) in collaboration with Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Johnny Isakson (GA) and Ranking Member Jon Tester (MT). As Chairman Roe said, "we didn't write a perfect bill; I haven't seen a perfect bill be written yet." However, this carefully crafted compromise represents a balanced approach to ensuring timely access to care while continuing to strengthen the VA health care system that millions of veterans choose and rely on.

When this historic legislation is signed in the coming days by President Trump, please know that the members of DAV and the DAV Auxiliary -- as well as our family, friends and supporters -- played a critical role in making this happen. Thank you to everyone who took the time to call, visit, write, email, text and tweet their elected officials to build support for this bill. Together, we can and will continue to keep the promise to the men and women who served, especially those who were injured or made ill by their service.