

107TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

H. R. 336

To amend title 38, United States Code, to enhance outreach programs carried out by the Department of Veterans Affairs to provide for more fully informing eligible surviving spouses and dependents of deceased veterans of benefits available to them under the laws administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and to improve assistance provided at local levels by providing for staff with specific responsibilities to assist those individuals in obtaining benefits under those laws.

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

JANUARY 31, 2001

Mr. DOYLE (for himself, Mr. BALDACCI, Mr. BORSKI, Mr. BRADY of Pennsylvania, Mr. COYNE, Mr. EVANS, Mr. GEKAS, Mr. HOLDEN, Mr. KANJORSKI, Mr. LARSON of Connecticut, Mr. MASCARA, Mr. MURTHA, and Mr. PASCRELL) introduced the following bill; which was referred to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs

A BILL

To amend title 38, United States Code, to enhance outreach programs carried out by the Department of Veterans Affairs to provide for more fully informing eligible surviving spouses and dependents of deceased veterans of benefits available to them under the laws administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and to improve assistance provided at local levels by providing for staff with specific responsibilities to assist those individuals in obtaining benefits under those laws.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

3 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

4 This Act may be cited as the “Surviving Spouses and
5 Dependents Outreach Enhancement and Veterans Case-
6 work Improvement Act”.

7 **SEC. 2. FINDINGS.**

8 Congress makes the following findings:

9 (1) The Department of Veterans Affairs by law
10 provides benefits not only to veterans of service in
11 the Armed Forces but also to eligible surviving
12 spouses and dependents of deceased veterans.

13 (2) There are over 600,000 surviving spouses
14 and dependents receiving dependency and indemnity
15 compensation (DIC) or death pensions from the De-
16 partment of Veterans Affairs.

17 (3) Presently, the Department of Veterans Af-
18 fairs does not target this population with specific
19 outreach efforts, nor does it provide program out-
20 reach coordinators designated at each regional office
21 of the Department to assist this population and
22 other survivors who may be eligible for benefits from
23 the Department.

24 (4) Approximately 1,600 veterans die daily,
25 many survived by widows and dependents who may

1 not be fully informed as to their eligibility for bene-
2 fits under laws administered by the Secretary of
3 Veterans Affairs.

4 (5) There is no formal program for coordination
5 of benefits for surviving spouses and dependents at
6 any level within the Department of Veterans Affairs.

7 (6) Due to insufficient outreach efforts, infor-
8 mational updates targeted specifically to surviving
9 spouses and dependents are not provided. Outreach
10 efforts to provide information concerning changes in
11 service-connection for disabilities presumed associ-
12 ated with exposure to herbicides and ionizing radi-
13 ation and former prisoners of war have been insuffi-
14 cient to inform survivors of benefits to which they
15 may now be entitled.

16 **SEC. 3. NATIONAL GOAL TO FULLY INFORM AND ASSIST**
17 **SURVIVING SPOUSES AND DEPENDENTS RE-**
18 **GARDING ELIGIBILITY FOR BENEFITS AND**
19 **HEALTH CARE SERVICES.**

20 (a) NATIONAL GOAL.—Congress hereby declares it to
21 be a national goal to fully inform surviving spouses and
22 dependents regarding their eligibility for benefits and
23 health care services under laws administered by the Sec-
24 retary of Veterans Affairs.

1 (b) COOPERATIVE EFFORTS ENCOURAGED.—Con-
2 gress hereby encourages all elements within the Depart-
3 ment of Veterans Affairs and private and public sector en-
4 tities (including veterans service organizations and vet-
5 erans widows organizations) to work cooperatively to fully
6 inform the surviving spouses and dependents of veterans
7 regarding their eligibility for benefits and health care serv-
8 ices under laws administered by the Secretary of Veterans
9 Affairs.

10 **SEC. 4. REQUIREMENT FOR OUTREACH EFFORTS AND**
11 **DEDICATED STAFF AT EACH REGIONAL OF-**
12 **FICE.**

13 (a) FINDINGS.—Congress and the Department of
14 Veterans Affairs have historically targeted certain specific
15 populations for outreach efforts concerning benefits under
16 laws administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs.
17 Groups currently targeted for such outreach efforts and
18 for which program outreach coordinators have been des-
19 igned at each regional office of the Department of Vet-
20 erans Affairs are the following:

- 21 (1) Former prisoners of war.
- 22 (2) Women veterans.
- 23 (3) Minority veterans.
- 24 (4) Active duty personnel.
- 25 (5) Homeless veterans.

1 (6) Elderly veterans.

2 (7) Recently separated veterans.

3 (b) ELIGIBLE DEPENDENT DEFINED.—Paragraph
4 (2) of section 7721(b) of title 38, United States Code, is
5 amended to read as follows:

6 “(2) the term ‘eligible dependent’ means a
7 spouse, surviving spouse (whether or not remarried),
8 child (regardless of age or marital status), or parent
9 of a person who served in the active military, naval,
10 or air service.”.

11 (c) IMPROVED OUTREACH PROGRAM.—(1) Sub-
12 chapter II of chapter 77 of title 38, United States Code,
13 is amended by adding at the end the following new section:

14 **“§ 7727. Outreach for eligible dependents**

15 “(a) In carrying out this subchapter, the Secretary
16 shall ensure that the needs of eligible dependents are fully
17 addressed.

18 “(b)(1) In order to carry out subsection (a), the Sec-
19 retary shall assign such employees of the Veterans Bene-
20 fits Administration as the Secretary considers appropriate
21 to conduct outreach programs and provide outreach serv-
22 ices for eligible dependents. In areas where the number
23 of eligible dependents warrant doing so, the Secretary
24 shall assign at least one employee in the Veterans Benefits
25 Administration regional office to serve as a full-time coor-

1 dinator of outreach programs and services for eligible de-
2 pendants in that region.

3 “(2) Responsibilities of employees assigned to out-
4 reach functions under paragraph (1) shall include pro-
5 viding eligible dependents with (A) information about ben-
6 efits under laws administered by the Secretary, (B) assist-
7 ance in claims preparation and inquiry resolution, and (C)
8 in the case of a dependent of a deceased veteran for whom
9 necessary records are incomplete, assistance in obtaining
10 such records and other necessary information concerning
11 the veteran.

12 “(c) Whenever an eligible dependent first applies for
13 any benefit under laws administered by the Secretary, the
14 Secretary shall provide to the dependent information con-
15 cerning eligibility for benefits and health care services
16 under programs administered by the Secretary. For pur-
17 poses of this paragraph, a request for burial or related
18 benefits, including an application for life insurance pro-
19 ceeds, shall be treated by the Secretary as an initial appli-
20 cation for benefits.

21 “(d)(1) Information provided an eligible dependent
22 under this section shall include information on how to
23 apply for benefits for which the dependent may be eligible,
24 including information about assistance available under
25 subsection (b) and section 7722(d) of this title.

1 “(2) In the case of eligible dependents who are mem-
2 bers of distinct beneficiary populations (such as survivors
3 of deceased veterans), the Secretary shall ensure that in-
4 formation provided under this section includes specific in-
5 formation about benefits relating to that population.

6 “(e) For any geographic area in which there is a sig-
7 nificant population of eligible dependents whose primary
8 language is a language other than English, the Secretary
9 shall make information provided under this subsection
10 available to those dependents in the dominant language
11 in that area (in addition to English).

12 “(f) Outreach services and assistance shall be pro-
13 vided for eligible dependents through the same means that
14 are used for other specially targeted groups.

15 “(g) The Secretary shall ensure that the availability
16 of outreach services and assistance for eligible dependents
17 under this subchapter is made known through a variety
18 of means, including the Internet, correspondence of the
19 Department, announcements in veterans publications, an-
20 nouncements to the media, telephone directories, direct
21 correspondence to congressional offices, military bases
22 public affairs offices, military retiree affairs offices, and
23 United States embassies.

24 “(h) The Secretary shall support the Department’s
25 periodic evaluation under section 527 of this title con-

cerning the Department's efforts to address the needs of
eligible dependents.

“(i) The Secretary shall submit to Congress an annual report on the programs of the Department addressing the information and assistance needs of eligible dependents. The Secretary shall include in each such report the following:

“(1) Information about expenditures, costs, and workload under the program of the Department directed towards the information and assistance needs of eligible dependents.

“(2) Information about outreach efforts directed toward eligible dependents.

“(3) Information about emerging needs within the program that relate to other provisions of law, including section 7725 of this title with respect to language needs of eligible dependents.

“(4) Information as to the timeline for implementation of improvements to meet existing and emerging needs of eligible dependents in addition to those specified in this section.”.

(2) The table of sections at the beginning of such chapter is amended by inserting after the item relating to section 7726 the following new item:

“7727. Outreach for eligible dependents.”.