

spouse has been granted permission to build on communal land. It is also our understanding that meaningful interest means that the veteran has the right to reside in the home under tribal laws.

Again, I believe S. 1235 is a fitting tribute to our veterans and I am especially pleased that this legislation provides American Samoas veterans with the housing opportunities and other benefits they deserve. For this reason, I again thank my colleagues for including my provision in this important legislation and for supporting the Veterans Housing Opportunity and Benefits Act of 2006, the Congressman concluded.

ACKNOWLEDGING THE ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF MS. JENNETTE STARKS-FAULKNER, 2014 FENCING WORLD CHAMPION

HON. GREGORY W. MEEKS

OF NEW YORK

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, November 20, 2014

Mr. MEEKS. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to recognize the accomplishments of Ms. Jennette Starks-Faulkner. As you know Mr. Speaker, great athletes are not born they are forged through the combined efforts of our entire community and the dedication and determination of individuals. Ms. Starks-Faulkner's discipline and her commitment to living a healthy and active lifestyle is evident in the success she has found participating in competitions hosted by the United States Fencing Association.

Ms. Starks-Faulkner's precise footwork, lightning thrusts, and deft ripostes have made her one of the most accomplished fencers in the entire world. This past October in Debrecen, Hungary she became the first U.S. woman ever to win the International Fencing Federation's Veteran Fencing World Championship gold medal in foil competition. Among her long list of achievements, which I ask be added into the RECORD, Ms. Starks-Faulkner won a gold medal at the 2014 USA Fencing National Championships in the Veteran Foil competition, a silver in the Veteran Saber competition and she has represented the United States as a member of the last seven Veteran World Championship teams.

Anyone who watches Ms. Starks-Faulkner compete will attest that her physical ability is only surpassed by her willingness to give everything she has to win. In a sport where there are very few African American participants, Ms. Starks-Faulkner has distinguished herself as the first among champions. While small in stature, her presence casts a great shadow on her competition. Ms. Starks-Faulkner's accomplishments are a testament to the power of the human spirit and the limitless potential each and every person possesses. Lastly, her dedication to fencing is an important reminder not only to her students, but to all Americans, that when you believe in your dreams, nothing can stop you.

As an ardent admirer of those who would push beyond their limitations, I salute Ms. Starks-Faulkner and her long list of accomplishments.

THE BLACK LUNG BENEFITS IMPROVEMENT ACT OF 2014

HON. MATT CARTWRIGHT

OF PENNSYLVANIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, November 20, 2014

Mr. CARTWRIGHT. Mr. Speaker, I am introducing the Black Lung Benefits Improvement Act of 2014 today to help disabled coal miners get benefits that they are entitled to but often unable to access.

Coal workers' pneumoconiosis, commonly referred to as "black lung," is a debilitating and deadly disease caused by the long-term inhalation of coal dust in underground and surface coal mines. According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, black lung has caused or contributed to more than 76,000 deaths since 1968, with thousands of miners still sick and dying from the disease.

The Federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act of 1969, which included the Black Lung Benefits Act, contained a program designed to provide compensation and medical care to miners who are totally disabled due to black lung. To secure benefits, disabled coal miners must engage in lengthy and complex litigation against local operators that has been proven to unfairly burden claimants and prevent them from receiving the benefits to which they are entitled.

In 2009, the Government Accountability Office found that "coal miners face a number of challenges pursuing federal black lung claims, including finding legal representation and developing sound medical evidence to support their claims." More recent award-winning investigations by the Center for Public Integrity and ABC News uncovered numerous cases in which coal operators and their attorneys defeated claims by hiring doctors who systematically failed to diagnose black lung disease, or by withholding medical evidence from miners, surviving spouses, and judges that would have proven the miners' eligibility for benefits. These and other unethical practices were examined as part of a July 22, 2014, hearing before the Senate Subcommittee on Employment and Workplace Safety. In addition, bureaucratic delays impede timely decisions about miners' benefits, with miners waiting an average of 42 months to receive a decision on their claim from an administrative law judge in the Department of Labor.

In the past year, the Department of Labor has taken several steps to address these issues; however, administrative actions alone will not be able to solve the systematic problems facing victims of black lung disease. That is why Congress has an obligation to reform this program so that it better serves and honors those who have helped supply the energy that our country relies on to light our homes and power our factories.

I want to thank Congressman GEORGE MILLER, the senior Democrat on the Committee on Education and the Workforce, for his leadership on this issue, and for Representatives JOE COURTNEY, NICK RAHALL and ROBERT C. "BOBBY" SCOTT for joining me in sponsoring this important legislation.

BLACK LUNG BENEFITS IMPROVEMENT ACT OF 2014

HON. GEORGE MILLER

OF CALIFORNIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, November 20, 2014

Mr. GEORGE MILLER of California. Mr. Speaker, today I am joining Representatives CARTWRIGHT, SCOTT, COURTNEY, and RAHALL in introducing the Black Lung Benefits Improvement Act of 2014.

The Black Lung Benefits Act was enacted in 1969 to provide health care and modest benefits to coal miners who develop black lung disease, also known as coal workers' pneumoconiosis, which is a crippling respiratory disease that has left generations of miners tethered to oxygen tanks. Today, the black lung benefits program is failing far too many miners and their survivors because there is an unfair disparity in medical and legal resources between miners and coal operators when it comes to establishing eligibility for benefits.

This legislation seeks to level the playing field by ensuring that miners have equal access to medical evidence, better access to legal resources, a remedy for those whose claims were denied due to recent discoveries of discredited medical evidence. In addition, it includes a requirement that the Department of Labor improve the timeliness of benefit decisions and an adjustment of benefit payments so that miners and their survivors receive the cost of living increases that Congress intended.

Black lung disease has killed more than 76,000 miners since 1968. Rates of black lung disease dropped steadily after the Federal Coal Mine Safety and Health Act of 1969 set enforceable limits on exposure to coal mine dust. However, rates are now on the rise again, according to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, or NIOSH. The number of people with the most severe form of black lung disease has spiked ten-fold over the past 15 years. In a heartbreaking example of the disease's prevalence, autopsies of the 24 miners who died in the Upper Big Branch mine explosion in 2010 revealed that 17 of these miners had black lung. And the Department of Labor expects 7,300 black lung benefit cases to be filed in fiscal years 2014 and 2015, an increase of 35 percent since fiscal year 2012.

The Black Lung Benefits Improvement Act of 2014 seeks to level the playing field for miners and strengthen our black lung benefits program in nine key ways.

First, it addresses the lack of legal assistance available to miners. The determination of a claimant's eligibility for black lung benefits often requires complex, adversarial litigation, but resource disparities between coal companies and claimants make it difficult for many miners and survivors with meritorious claims to prevail. The Government Accountability Office found that many claimants under the Black Lung Benefits Act are not equipped with the medical and legal resources necessary to develop sufficient evidence that can meet the requirements for benefits. Miners often lack complete and reliable medical evidence, which increases the risk that the individuals who review claims for benefits will be presented with insufficient medical evidence. Similarly, without better options for legal representation, significant numbers of such claimants proceed