

provides educational counseling or a certificate of eligibility to veterans or servicemembers who are eligible for VA education benefits, the Department also provide information on articulation agreements at institutions of higher learning.

□ 1645

The Post-9/11 GI Bill has benefitted more than 1.5 million servicemembers, veterans, and their dependents since its inception in 2009. While many of these beneficiaries complete their entire program of education at one school, we often see individuals who transfer to another school in the middle of their program due to a plethora of circumstances. If they do transfer schools, their previously earned credits can play a large role in determining the length of time it may take for students to complete their program at the new school that they have chosen to go to, and in some cases not all earned credits will transfer. Often, the transferability of certain credits between different institutions of higher learning is not always on an individual's radar when they apply for a certain school or a certain program, and a veteran may or may not have understood how credits transfer when they first initiated their education career.

H.R. 5047 would simply provide our student veterans with additional information as they apply to and attend schools by requiring VA to provide information on articulation agreements at a particular school and that school's agreements with another institution. Our veterans and their dependents deserve full transparency as they set out to use their hard-earned benefits. I thank my colleague, the gentleman from Georgia (Mr. JODY B. HICE) for introducing this bipartisan legislation which has my complete support.

Mr. Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

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

Mr. Speaker, I rise in support of H.R. 5047, the Protecting Veterans' Educational Choice Act of 2016. I thank the gentleman from Georgia (Mr. JODY B. HICE) for introducing this commendable legislation.

This bill would require the VA to include information about the educational services available to all veterans seeking to use their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits, and it would require VA counselors who provide educational or vocational counseling to inform the veterans about the articulation agreements that exist between schools that govern the transfer of credits. Articulation agreements refer to formal agreements between two or more institutions of higher learning, documenting the credit transfer policies for a specific academic program.

Student veterans have an important decision to make when they choose a college or university to attend with their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits. It is essential that they understand at the

outset whether they could transfer their credits to another college or university down the line.

We have seen too many examples of student veterans depleting their limited GI Bill benefits to attend for-profit colleges, only to find out later that their opportunities to transfer to schools without losing time, money, and credit hours are severely limited.

Ensuring that student veterans know in advance whether a school will give them credit for completed courses if they choose to transfer will help veterans avoid choosing schools where their credits will not transfer, thus saving them both time and their hard-earned Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits.

I thank Representative HICE for introducing this important piece of legislation, which I am proud to cosponsor and support.

Mr. Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. MILLER of Florida. Mr. Speaker, I yield 3 minutes to the gentleman from the 10th District of Georgia (Mr. JODY B. HICE), the sponsor of this particular piece of legislation, the gentleman from the great community of Monroe.

Mr. JODY B. HICE of Georgia. Mr. Speaker, obviously I rise in strong support of this bill, H.R. 5047, the Protecting Veterans' Educational Choice Act of 2016.

Let me just extend a very sincere and heartfelt thank you to Chairman MILLER and Ranking Member TAKANO—who, by the way, is an original cosponsor of this bill—for their support of this bill and overall wide support for this bill. I appreciate the comments that both of my colleagues have made pertaining to this bill.

The Post-9/11 GI Bill, I believe without question, is the most generous educational benefit that our Nation has ever passed. As has already been mentioned, over a million student veterans have benefitted tremendously from that particular piece of legislation. Some of the benefits include help to cover cost of tuition, books, supplies, even housing. Yet, in spite of all this, we still find that many of our veterans find themselves still having to take out student loans. Part of the reason for that is, as has been discussed by my colleagues, many of these veterans, as they are going to various schools somewhere in the midst of the process, discover that the credits that they have received from this school won't transfer over here; and somewhere in the middle of that timeframe, much of their GI Bill has already been spent, and so they find themselves in an extremely difficult and awkward position.

I won't reiterate the details of this bill because it has already been done, but the basics of this addresses that problem, Mr. Speaker. It does not have anything to say regarding what school a veteran chooses. They are free to go to whatever school they want to, but what this bill says is up front they

need to be aware of whether or not their credits will transfer to another school. They don't need to find that out on the back end. They need to be fully informed on the front end as they are making these career and educational choices.

I think it is a shame for many of our veterans to feel that they have misused their GI benefits because they weren't informed enough from the beginning of this process. It is incumbent upon Congress, I believe, to ensure that our veterans have as much information as they need at the front end of their educational choices that will best benefit them and their families.

Again, I strongly thank the chairman and the ranking member for their support. I believe this bill is going to go a long way in addressing this problem. I urge my colleagues to support H.R. 5047.

Mr. TAKANO. Mr. Speaker, I strongly support this legislation. I have no other speakers. I urge my colleagues to vote "yes" on H.R. 5047.

I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. MILLER of Florida. Mr. Speaker, I, too, would encourage all Members to support H.R. 5047.

I yield back the balance of my time.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The question is on the motion offered by the gentleman from Florida (Mr. MILLER) that the House suspend the rules and pass the bill, H.R. 5047.

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. MILLER of Florida. 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.

WORKING TO INTEGRATE NETWORKS GUARANTEEING MEMBER ACCESS NOW ACT

Mr. MILLER of Florida. Mr. Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and pass the bill (H.R. 5166) to amend title 38, United States Code, to provide certain employees of Members of Congress and certain employees of State or local governmental agencies with access to case-tracking information of the Department of Veterans Affairs, as amended.

The Clerk read the title of the bill.

The text of the bill is as follows:

H.R. 5166

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 "Working to Integrate Networks Guaranteeing Member Access Now Act" or the "WINGMAN Act".

SEC. 2. PROVISION OF ACCESS TO CASE-TRACKING INFORMATION.

(a) IN GENERAL.—Chapter 59 of title 38, United States Code, is amended by adding at the end the following:

“§5906. Access of certain congressional employees to veteran records

“(a) IN GENERAL.—(1) The Secretary shall provide to each veteran who submits a claim for benefits under the laws administered by the Secretary an opportunity to permit a covered congressional employee employed in the office of the Member of Congress representing the district where the veteran resides to have access to all of the records of the veteran in the databases of the Veterans Benefits Administration.

“(2) Notwithstanding any other provision of law, upon receipt of permission from the veteran under paragraph (1), the Secretary shall provide read-only access to such records to such a covered congressional employee in a manner that does not allow such employee to modify the data contained in such records or in any part of a database of the Veterans Benefits Administration.

“(3) A Member of Congress may designate not more than two employees of the Member as covered congressional employees.

“(b) COVERED CONGRESSIONAL EMPLOYEES.—(1) In this section, a covered congressional employee is a permanent, full-time employee of a Member of Congress—

“(A) whose responsibilities include assisting the constituents of the Member with issues regarding departments or agencies of the Federal Government;

“(B) who satisfies the criteria required by the Secretary for recognition as an agent or attorney under this chapter; and

“(C) who is designated by a Member of Congress as a covered congressional employee for purposes of this section.

“(2) The Secretary may not impose any requirement other than the requirements under paragraph (1) before treating an employee as a covered congressional employee for purposes of this section.

“(c) NONRECOGNITION.—A covered congressional employee may not be recognized as an agent or attorney under this chapter.

“(d) LIMITATION ON USE OF FUNDS.—None of the amounts made available to carry out this section may be used to design, develop, or administer any training for purposes of providing training to covered congressional employees.

“(e) AUTHORIZATION OF APPROPRIATIONS.—(1) No additional funds are authorized to be appropriated to carry out this section. This section may only be carried out using amounts otherwise authorized to be appropriated.

“(2) For the period of fiscal years 2017 through 2020, not more than \$10,000,000 may be made available to carry out this section.

“(f) DEFINITIONS.—In this section:

“(1) The term ‘database of the Veterans Benefits Administration’ means any database of the Veterans Benefits Administration in which the records of veterans relating to claims for benefits under the laws administered by the Secretary are retained, including information regarding medical records, compensation and pension exams records, rating decisions, statements of the case, supplementary statements of the case, notices of disagreement, Form-9, and any successor form.

“(2) The term ‘Member of Congress’ means a Representative, a Senator, a Delegate to Congress, or the Resident Commissioner of Puerto Rico.”

(b) CLERICAL AMENDMENT.—The table of sections at the beginning of such chapter is amended by adding at the end the following new item:

“5906. Access of certain congressional employees to veteran records.”

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the rule, the gentleman from Florida (Mr. MILLER) and the gen-

tleman from California (Mr. TAKANO) each will control 20 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from Florida.

GENERAL LEAVE

Mr. MILLER of Florida. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members may have 5 legislative days within which to revise and extend their remarks and add extraneous material on H.R. 5166, as amended.

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

There was no objection.

Mr. MILLER of Florida. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Mr. Speaker, I rise today to urge all of my colleagues to support H.R. 5166, as amended, the WINGMAN Act. I thank our colleagues, the gentleman from Florida (Mr. YOHIO) and the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. RODNEY DAVIS), for introducing the WINGMAN Act, which will help Members better serve our constituents.

H.R. 5166 would allow our offices to assist veterans who are seeking information about the status of their claims for disability compensation. Unfortunately, when a congressional staff member contacts the VA for more information about a claim, it can take often weeks or months for the Department of Veterans Affairs to respond. VA's delay in answering congressional inquiries only adds to the veteran's frustration. The veteran simply wants to know the status of his or her claim.

H.R. 5166, as amended, would require VA to give designated permanent, full-time congressional employees access to VA databases so that our staff can tell a veteran the current status of their application for benefits. Moreover, to protect veterans' privacy, the WINGMAN Act mandates that congressional employees first obtain permission before viewing a veteran's information. At the same time, the congressional employee would not be able to alter the electronic file in any way.

Passing this bill will help veterans who simply want to understand where their claim is in the process. I urge my colleagues to support H.R. 5166, as amended.

Mr. Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

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

I rise in support of H.R. 5166, sponsored by Representative YOHIO, which would give certified congressional office caseworkers access to veterans' electronic disability claims records at the Veterans Benefits Administration.

The purpose of the bill is to provide faster answers to our veteran constituents who call our offices to help with their VA claims. By the time veterans contact us, many have already faced delays or frustrating experiences trying to get answers themselves. This bill will allow our congressional caseworkers read-only access to disability claims records. This means they will

not be able to add or remove anything from a veteran's record.

The bill also includes privacy safeguards, which reinforce the necessity for getting prior consent from a veteran before a caseworker can access a veteran's files. Additionally, the bill requires that congressional employees certified for this access must be full-time employees who provide constituent services.

I am hopeful that as this program is developed, VA will put in place a tracking system to ensure these employees are only assisting constituents from their congressional districts and that congressional staff are held accountable if found to have abused any aspect of this new and unprecedented authority.

In short, Mr. Speaker, there is broad, bipartisan support among our colleagues for helping veterans get timely answers to their claims questions. Allowing full-time congressional staff members access to electronic disability claims records on a read-only basis is a step in the direction of putting the veteran's interest first and foremost.

I support H.R. 5166, as amended, and urge my colleagues to do the same.

Mr. Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. MILLER of Florida. Mr. Speaker, I yield 3 minutes to the gentleman from the Third District of the State of Florida (Mr. YOHIO), a primary sponsor of this legislation.

Mr. YOHIO. Mr. Speaker, I thank Chairman MILLER, a fellow Floridian, for his support of this measure. Without his help and the help of his team—Maria and Cecilia in particular—we would not be here today.

This is a monumental bill for our veterans. This comes down to customer service for our veterans. I feel we are in the customer service business. They are not constituents. These are people who have paid the price to defend this country, and it is time that we give them the service that they need.

What this does is it gives us read-only access to a veteran's claim. We have already got a privacy form. We are on a secure system, and this just moves the claim through the process that much quicker so that we can find out why it is hung up. So many times, as the chairman said, the average time it takes for an office to receive the records they request from the VA is 6 months, and at times even over a year. What this will do is, we can look into there, we can read only that particular case, and we can say, You forgot to sign it, you forgot to date it, you forgot to check this box; and we can report immediately back to the veteran. It should free up the VA system.

No single man or woman who has served and protected our freedoms should have to wait to receive the care and benefits that they have more than earned. Unfortunately, they have become statistics, nothing more than numbers on the page, so many times with the VA system. This ends with the

passage of the WINGMAN bill. The WINGMAN removes the middleman and allows the staff to access these records directly without waiting on the VA.

Mr. Speaker, I urge all of my colleagues in the House to support this measure and be a good wingman and let our Nation's veterans know that we have their six. Again, I thank the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. RODNEY DAVIS) for his help on this strong bipartisan bill.

□ 1700

Mr. MILLER of Florida. Mr. Speaker, I yield 1 minute to the gentleman from Georgia (Mr. COLLINS).

Mr. COLLINS of Georgia. Mr. Speaker, I come to the floor as a veteran who is currently still serving in the United States Air Force Reserve. I served in Iraq. What Mr. YOHO and Mr. DAVIS have done here is come together to bring common sense to something that really is amazing: we have veterans today who have to call their Congressman to get help, and we are actually hamstrung in trying to help them.

That is not the way it should be. Our veterans deserve the best service that they can have. They deserve it on time, they deserve it in a prompt fashion, and they should not have to call their Congressman. But when they do, we need to give our congressional offices all the tools that they need to help with that.

I just want to compliment these Congressmen for bringing this bill forward and encourage the House to support this. This is a great bill, and it is really the reason why we are here.

Mr. MILLER of Florida. Mr. Speaker, I yield 3 minutes to the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. RODNEY DAVIS), another prime sponsor of this bill, who is from the 13th Congressional District.

Mr. RODNEY DAVIS of Illinois. Mr. Speaker, I want to talk about Carl, an Army veteran from Springfield, Illinois, who couldn't get a response from the VA to receive cancer treatment through the VA Choice program. After multiple communications, my office was finally able to get the authorization from the VA.

Bette, from Staunton, Illinois, the wife of a decorated Vietnam vet who served his country for more than a decade, waited over a year for an answer from the VA about benefits owed to her late husband. Finally, my office was successful in getting Bette, who was experiencing financial difficulty at the time, the accrued benefits owed to her husband.

Kenneth, of Urbana, Illinois, a Bronze Star recipient while serving in Kuwait, Iraq, and Afghanistan, was denied benefits due to a missing doctor's examination because he was deployed at the time and the VA never rescheduled the appointment. He contacted my office, and we worked with the VA to ensure that the benefits were received.

Lawrence, of Palmer, Illinois, another Bronze Star and Purple Heart recipient, simply wanted a copy of his

medical records but never heard back from the VA. After several months, he reached out to our office and we were able to get them from the VA.

Another constituent of mine recently asked my office for help after her husband, who was a veteran, passed away. She has been waiting for 6 months for an answer from the VA, and now my office continues to wait for a response from the VA.

These examples not only show the sometimes incompetence and unresponsiveness of certain personnel at the VA, but they also show how important congressional offices are to getting the answers our veterans need and deserve.

Many times when a veteran contacts their Member of Congress for help, it is their last resort. It is not their first call. They don't know where else to turn. Our caseworkers become the middleman between the veteran and the VA.

VA casework in my office remains highest in volume. We currently have over 96 open cases, and we have closed nearly 1,000 in the 4 years that I have been in office. Ask almost any caseworker, and they will tell you the VA is one of the most difficult agencies to get a response from.

It is unacceptable that it takes this long. That is why the WINGMAN Act, H.R. 5166, needs to be passed. It simply allows our certified constituent caseworkers, our advocates, to access certain VA files in order to check the status and progress of claims. This technology will be used to help our veterans get the answers they deserve. It is not going to solve the systemic problems we see at the VA, but it is going to help us hold the VA accountable and get answers for veterans whom we are honored to represent.

I want to thank my colleague, Representative YOHO, for working with me and many others on this important piece of legislation; and, Mr. Speaker, I want to thank Chairman MILLER not only for his help on this, but for his service to this great institution. He is somebody who has put our veterans first as chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Committee and somebody who has spent his career making sure that commonsense proposals like this get enacted so that our veterans, those whom he cares about the most and we care about the most, get the answers and the responses they deserve.

Mr. TAKANO. Mr. Speaker, I ask my colleagues to join me in supporting H.R. 5166, as amended.

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

Mr. MILLER of Florida. Mr. Speaker, I urge all of my colleagues to support H.R. 5166, as amended.

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

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The question is on the motion offered by the gentleman from Florida (Mr. MILLER) that the House suspend the rules and pass the bill, H.R. 5166, as amended.

The question was taken; and (two-thirds being in the affirmative) the rules were suspended and the bill, as amended, was passed.

The title of the bill was amended so as to read: "A bill amend title 38, United States Code, to permit veterans to grant access to their records in the databases of the Veterans Benefits Administration to certain designated congressional employees, and for other purposes."

A motion to reconsider was laid on the table.

HONORING INVESTMENTS IN RECRUITING AND EMPLOYING AMERICAN MILITARY VETERANS ACT OF 2016

Mr. MILLER of Florida. Mr. Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and pass the bill (H.R. 3286) to encourage effective, voluntary private sector investments to recruit, employ, and retain men and women who have served in the United States military with annual presidential awards to private sector employers recognizing such efforts, and for other purposes, as amended.

The Clerk read the title of the bill.

The text of the bill is as follows:

H.R. 3286

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 "Honoring Investments in Recruiting and Employing American Military Veterans Act of 2016" or the "HIRE Vets Act".

SEC. 2. HIRE VETS MEDALLION PROGRAM.

(a) PROGRAM ESTABLISHED.—Not later than one year after the date of enactment of this Act, the Secretary of Labor shall establish, by rule, a HIRE Vets Medallion Program to solicit voluntary information from employers for purposes of recognizing, by means of an award to be designated a "HIRE Vets Medallion", verified efforts by such employers—

(1) to recruit, employ, and retain veterans; and

(2) to provide community and charitable services supporting the veteran community.

(b) APPLICATION PROCESS.—Beginning in the calendar year following the calendar year in which the Secretary establishes the program—

(1) the Secretary shall annually—

(A) solicit and accept voluntary applications from employers in order to consider whether those employers should receive a HIRE Vets Medallion;

(B) review applications received in each calendar year; and

(C) provide to the President a list of recipients; and

(2) the President shall annually—

(A) notify such recipients of their awards; and

(B) at a time to coincide with the annual commemoration of Veterans Day—

(i) announce the names of such recipients;

(ii) recognize such recipients through publication in the Federal Register; and

(iii) issue to each such recipient—

(I) a HIRE Vets Medallion of the level determined under section 3; and

(II) a certificate stating that such employer is entitled to display such HIRE Vets Medallion during the following calendar year, to be designated a "HIRE Vets Medallion Certificate".