

They say Gorsuch is highly revered by Democrats and Republicans. As USA TODAY noted in its editorial endorsing Gorsuch's confirmation just today, "He has gotten an array of glowing references, including from some Democrats and liberals." I mentioned some this morning; there are many more.

Here is just one additional example of how praise for Judge Gorsuch has bridged the political divide: Despite their ideological differences, former Colorado Governor Bill Ritter, a Democrat, and former Colorado attorney general John Suthers, a Republican, agree that Judge Gorsuch should be confirmed. They said:

Gorsuch's temperament, personal decency and qualifications are beyond dispute.

It is time to use this confirmation process to examine and exalt the characteristics of a judge who demonstrates that he or she is scholarly, compassionate, committed to the law, and will function as part of a truly independent, apolitical judiciary. Judge Gorsuch fits that bill.

It reminds us of what David Frederick, a board member of the left-leaning American Constitution Society and longtime Democrat, recently said: "The Senate should confirm [Gorsuch] because there is no principled reason to vote no."

"There is no principled reason to vote no." He is absolutely right. So it goes without saying that there is no principled reason to block an up-or-down vote on this supremely qualified nominee, either.

I look forward to joining my Senate colleagues in supporting Judge Gorsuch's nomination to the Supreme Court later this week.

Madam President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mrs. ERNST). The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. TESTER. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

AMENDING THE VETERANS ACCESS, CHOICE, AND ACCOUNTABILITY ACT OF 2014

Mr. TESTER. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the Committee on Veterans' Affairs be discharged from further consideration of S. 544 and the Senate proceed to its immediate consideration.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

The clerk will report the bill by title. The senior assistant legislative clerk read as follows:

A bill (S. 544) to amend the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014 to modify the termination date for the Veterans Choice Program, and for other purposes.

There being no objection, the Senate proceeded to consider the bill.

Mr. TESTER. Madam President, I know of no further debate on the bill.

The bill was ordered to be engrossed for a third reading and was read the third time.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The bill having been read the third time, the question is, Shall the bill pass?

The bill (S. 544) was passed, as follows:

S. 544

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

SECTION 1. MODIFICATION OF TERMINATION DATE FOR VETERANS CHOICE PROGRAM.

Section 101(p)(2) of the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014 (Public Law 113-146; 38 U.S.C. 1701 note) is amended by striking " , or the date that is 3 years after the date of the enactment of this Act, whichever occurs first".

SEC. 2. ELIMINATION OF REQUIREMENT TO ACT AS SECONDARY PAYER FOR CARE RELATING TO NON-SERVICE-CONNECTED DISABILITIES AND RECOVERY OF COSTS FOR CERTAIN CARE UNDER CHOICE PROGRAM.

(a) IN GENERAL.—Section 101(e) of the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014 (Public Law 113-146; 38 U.S.C. 1701 note) is amended—

(1) in the subsection heading, by striking "OTHER HEALTH-CARE PLAN" and inserting "RESPONSIBILITY FOR COSTS OF CERTAIN CARE";

(2) in paragraph (1), in the paragraph heading, by striking "TO SECRETARY" and inserting "ON HEALTH-CARE PLANS";

(3) by striking paragraphs (2) and (3);

(4) by redesignating paragraph (4) as paragraph (2); and

(5) by adding at the end the following new paragraph:

"(3) RECOVERY OF COSTS FOR CERTAIN CARE.—

"(A) IN GENERAL.—In any case in which an eligible veteran is furnished hospital care or medical services under this section for a non-service-connected disability described in subsection (a)(2) of section 1729 of title 38, United States Code, or for a condition for which recovery is authorized or with respect to which the United States is deemed to be a third party beneficiary under Public Law 87-693, commonly known as the 'Federal Medical Care Recovery Act' (42 U.S.C. 2651 et seq.), the Secretary shall recover or collect from a third party (as defined in subsection (i) of such section 1729) reasonable charges for such care or services to the extent that the veteran (or the provider of the care or services) would be eligible to receive payment for such care or services from such third party if the care or services had not been furnished by a department or agency of the United States.

"(B) USE OF AMOUNTS.—Amounts collected by the Secretary under subparagraph (A) shall be deposited in the Medical Community Care account of the Department. Amounts so deposited shall remain available until expended."

(b) CONFORMING AMENDMENT.—Paragraph (1) of such section is amended by striking "paragraph (4)" and inserting "paragraph (2)".

SEC. 3. AUTHORITY TO DISCLOSE CERTAIN MEDICAL RECORDS OF VETERANS WHO RECEIVE NON-DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS HEALTH CARE.

Section 7332(b)(2) of title 38, United States Code, is amended by adding at the end the following new subparagraph:

"(H)(i) To a non-Department entity (including private entities and other Federal

agencies) that provides hospital care or medical services to veterans as authorized by the Secretary.

"(ii) An entity to which a record is disclosed under this subparagraph may not re-disclose or use such record for a purpose other than that for which the disclosure was made."

Mr. TESTER. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the motion to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. TESTER. Madam President, I want to thank Senator MORAN and members of the Veterans' Affairs Committee for all their good work, Senator MCCAIN for his good work, and Chairman JOHN ISAKSON for his good work on this bill.

This Veterans Choice Program Improvement Act is an important piece of legislation that is going to really ensure that veterans can access care in their communities. It is a critically important piece of legislation that we should get done and get done now.

I think this body could learn from the work that was done on the Veterans' Affairs Committee under the leadership of Chairman ISAKSON for the veterans of this country. I don't think my home State of Montana is any exception. Veterans have been waiting far too long for an appointment at the VA and oftentimes had to drive 100 miles for an appointment. That is why we set up the Choice Program. It was supposed to allow these veterans to get their healthcare closer to home. Unfortunately, it did not work the way it should have. And we were inundated with redtape and a government contractor that struggled to schedule appointments with providers on time.

This Veterans Choice Program Improvement Act is not the end all. It is not what is going to fix the Choice Program in its entirety, but it certainly is a step in the right direction, a step that needed to be taken, and I commend the body for allowing this step to be taken.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Kansas.

Mr. MORAN. Madam President, I thank the Senator from Montana for his efforts to see that this legislation gets passed. I am pleased to see that we have been joined in a unanimous way by the Senate, Republicans and Democrats working together to see that our veterans receive better care.

In addition to the Senator from Montana, I thank Mr. MCCAIN, the Senator from Arizona, who is joining us on the floor. I also thank Senator ISAKSON in particular, the chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, for his leadership in seeing that we are here today to bring this legislation across the finish line.

The House passed legislation similar to this, so this is an opportunity for us to get an accomplishment—not for a pat on our backs but for the improvement in the care of those who served

our Nation. I asked this question on the Senate floor before: Of all the people in the United States, who would you expect to get the best care possible? While we want every American to have high-quality care and access to medical treatment, we certainly want to make certain those who served our country and to whom a commitment was made that they would receive care—we want that commitment fulfilled, and we want it done in a way that is advantageous and easy for our veterans.

The Senator from Montana is correct. The Choice Act is a significant improvement, in my mind, for accessing care. Kansas is not quite as large as the State of Montana, but we are a large rural State, and it is a long distance to a VA hospital. So Choice was brought into play to try to alleviate the backlog, the lack of providers within the VA, and the wait times that veterans faced, but also to try to satisfy the needs of veterans who live long distances from a VA facility.

So Choice is in place, but it still has been a difficult time for many veterans across the country and certainly at home. It is the most common conversation I have when I am back in Kansas. In fact, I had a townhall meeting in southwest Kansas, in Dodge City, and it is veterans who, in the public forum, will tell me about the problems with the VA and particularly with Choice, or they will line up after or before that meeting to tell me in person that they need help.

This legislation does three significant things. More is to come. We need a permanent act. This is an extension of the Choice Act that expires on August 7, so continuing the program is the first step while we work out the desired outcome of a long-term permanent program.

Secondly, it provides the money through that period of time. It allows the expenditure of dollars to pay for Choice.

Third, it eliminates the intermediary—somebody separate from the VA in paying the bills—and that reduces the bureaucracy and burden on our veterans.

I was just looking through what we call casework, things Kansans bring to our office to try to get solved. Front and center is the number of veterans who are being harassed by collection agencies for bills they thought would be paid by the VA through the Choice Program, and they are not being paid in a timely fashion. This eliminates the intermediary—the manager of the program—from paying the bills and restores that authority to the VA to write out the checks with the goal of reducing the bureaucracy and paperwork for the veterans. It also increases the timeliness for the payment that is due the healthcare provider—the doctor, the pharmacy, and the hospital.

Again, as a rural American, many of our providers are struggling. Hospital doors are a challenge to remain open in

rural communities across my State. And that long wait for a reimbursement check for services provided months ago also creates a burden on that hospital, that healthcare provider. So timely payment certainly will benefit the veterans, but it also increases the chances of the stability of healthcare providers in rural communities across my State and around the country.

Finally, it increases the ability for the sharing of medical records between the VA and that community healthcare provider.

Choice is in place to help those veterans who need to have care more quickly and who need to have care closer to home. This bill improves that program and extends it, and that is a significant development. I appreciate the opportunity I have had to work with the Senators from Arizona, Montana, and Georgia to make sure we got to the point we are today. I appreciate my colleagues' unanimous support for the passage of this legislation.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Arizona.

Mr. McCAIN. Madam President, I want to thank the Senator from Kansas for all the hard work he has done, and the Senator from Montana. On the rare occasion I come to praise him, I would like to give him my deep and heartfelt appreciation for his work in a bipartisan fashion on this issue. I mean that with all sincerity. I also thank our distinguished chairman, Senator ISAKSON. I also think I share with my colleagues an appreciation for Dr. Shulkin, the new Secretary of the Veterans' Administration, who has been an active and helpful participant in this effort.

Most everything has been said except that I would like to remind my colleagues that we now have—since the enactment in 2014, over 7 million appointments have been made using the Choice Program. Now, over 30,000 appointments are successfully made each week under the Choice Program.

The programs are set to expire in a few months, and, as pointed out by my colleagues, the VA has already begun to limit care for pregnant mothers, as well as cancer patients, because their treatment would extend beyond August. Soon all veterans will be kicked off the Choice Program.

I would just like to point out to my colleagues, if I could, that this crisis started in Phoenix, AZ, where 15,000 veterans were put on a wait list and over 40 veterans died while awaiting care. That is not acceptable in this Nation.

I believe the Choice Program is a major step forward. The truth is, the VA has a lot more to do to provide for the care we have obligated this Nation to on behalf of those who have fought and sacrificed for our Nation. The Choice Card has made a major step forward. I hope we can consider removing any geographic or other limitations as-

sociated with it. But what the Senators from Kansas and Montana have done today is to make sure this program continues and why it is important to pass it today—not one dollar Congress authorized to care for veterans under the Choice Program should go unused.

Let me mention what we have done. There are 7 million additional appointments for veterans in their communities, and over 1.5 million veterans have benefited from using the Choice Card that they would not have had otherwise. Some 350,000 more doctors, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants are available to treat veterans. There are 235,000 appointments per month through Veterans Choice—more than 10,000 per workday. The Veterans Choice Program more than doubles the number of medical providers nationwide that treat veterans. In Arizona, 11,700 medical providers in veterans communities have treated over 100,000 disabled veterans.

The Veterans Choice Card is being used at 700 hospitals and nearly 10,000 clinics nationwide. The Western Region is paying more than 90 percent of Veterans Choice doctors in less than 30 days and answering 900,000 phone calls per month, with an average time to answer of under 25 seconds. Over 3,000 veterans received hepatitis C treatments due to Veterans Choice funding.

There are still kinks in the operation. There are still bottlenecks. There are still times when veterans' payments, particularly, have not been done in a timely fashion, as the Senator from Kansas mentioned. Hopefully, that will change now. As with any program, it had its difficulties in its beginning. But I want to tell my colleagues that we should make the Choice Card available for any veteran, no matter where they happen to reside. It should be, I believe, the basis of our next effort. But in the meantime, I want to thank again the Senator from Kansas for his hard work.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. CORNYN. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

OLD VESSELS EXEMPTION ACT— Continued

UVALDE COUNTY, TEXAS, BUS ACCIDENT

Mr. CORNYN. Madam President, I wanted to come to the floor to talk about the important work for the Senate this week, now that the Judiciary Committee has voted on the Judge Neil Gorsuch nomination and he is available for floor consideration. But I wanted, first, to extend my deepest condolences to the families and friends of those tragically killed in an automobile crash near New Valley, TX, last week.

A bus carrying a group of 14 members of the First Baptist Church in New