

Trump nominated Neil Gorsuch to the U.S. Supreme Court. This was an excellent choice. He is an experienced Federal judge and accomplished scholar who understands the proper role of a judge under our Constitution.

I think the weather and my sinuses are not cooperating here at this moment.

I will be back later.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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 President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

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

VETERANS HEALTHCARE

Mr. ISAKSON. Mr. President, I am glad to join my colleague Senator TESTER from Montana on the floor for a discussion of our Veterans' Affairs, our accomplishments over the last 3 years and our challenges for the future.

I want to start out my part of the conversation by saying this. Three years ago, the Veterans' Administration was making big headlines. Those headlines were that they weren't working well, our veterans were waiting too long for care, there were failures in our system throughout, and people were looking for an alternative to the VA system because it was in such a quagmire. Thanks to the work of our committee, which the Presiding Officer today is one of those members, we set out to fix a lot of the problems. No. 1 was the hospital in Denver, which is 40 percent finished. It was 3 years behind, and we closed in. That hospital is open today and operating because the Veterans' Affairs Committee of the Senate buckled its shoes, got to work, got the VA fixed, and got the hospital finished.

The most challenging thing we faced were long wait times for appointments for our veterans and veterans' services for healthcare. It was longer than 30 days just for a routine appointment, sometimes being as long as 6 months to wait, and sometimes they were dying before they got called up from the waiting list, which happened in the Arizona case in Phoenix.

We had some tragic stories that came through. Our committee came together and said: We are going to fix this. We are going to put our shoulders to the grindstone, we are going to work out hard, and we are going to make it happen. Like always, fixing anything requires one element, and that is hard work.

This Committee has worked hard—Democrats and Republicans alike. They have been willing to get the new Secretary, Secretary Shulkin, confirmed. To all of his aides—Tom Bowman, who has been a great aide to our committee for a long time, and now is a direct aide to the Secretary. The committee has asked: What is it we need to do to get it fixed?

We started out this year with 11 bills introduced for the Veterans' Administration improvements in terms of healthcare. Ten of those eleven have passed. There is one left. We are going to have a perfect 11-for-11 year, if we get the votes before the end of this year, we get the CARE bill passed for our veterans, but even if that doesn't make it, we have dealt with long waiting lines for determination of benefits for the VA. Those long waiting lines are beginning to dissipate.

We don't have hospitals being shut down because they can't be finished. We have CBOCs being opened because they are being finished. We don't have near as many cases of horror stories in a VA health facility because the facilities are being run better.

Do we have problems? Sure, we have problems. Anytime you have the second largest agency of the Federal Government—which the VA health system is—you are going to have problems, but we are meeting them head-on. We are not running away from them. We have a Secretary who is really willing to work to make it happen.

I cannot say enough about Secretary Shulkin. He has been fantastic. He has been a great worker. He has given President Trump the message, in terms of what our veterans need, the challenge that we need from the White House to join us, and the White House has substantially done so, to help make a lot of improvements.

Working with our ranking member, we decided we would do a number of things: We would end the long wait times for determination of disability, and we have done that. That is in process. We wanted to see to it that the modern access to healthcare was available to all of our veterans, one way or another. We wanted to make sure we came up with creative ideas by using telemedicine and other techniques to deliver healthcare to our veterans.

Most importantly, we knew the Choice Act we passed 3 years ago, led by Senator MCCAIN—who is in our prayers and thoughts every day. I might add from the floor of the Senate today, we wish him the very best if he is listening. Senator MCCAIN went to work and came up with the first aspect of Choice, which passed 3 years ago. I was on the conference committee. We had this crazy idea that we were going to let veterans choose where they want to go for their healthcare. We set up the system to do that. The system worked pretty well in some cases. Senator TESTER will say in rural America it didn't work all that well, in some cases, but it was a good effort of ours to take the private sector in America and make it a force multiplier for the healthcare services delivered to our veterans and expand the access of healthcare to our vets.

Well, now we have before the Senate what we call the Care Act. It is the finishing touches of what was originally in the Choice Act. We are taking the things we learned and repealing what

was wrong. We are taking things we learned are right, and we are enhancing them. I hope every Member of the Senate who can hear my voice today will join me sometime in the next few weeks ahead to finish the job and pass the Care Act. Our committee passed it out 14 to 1, with Democrats and Republicans alike, shoulder to shoulder, voting for it. It is the right thing to do for our vets. We are hopefully going to do the same thing on the floor.

The Care Act does a lot of amazing things, but it takes what we have learned in 3 years and applies it to the real world for our veterans. It says a veteran has a choice for his healthcare, public or private, VA or private sector. The veteran and his or her doctor may determine where they want to go. The physician providing the services who is outside the system will cooperate with the VA, so we have good medical records for that veteran, and they will work together to choose doctors who have the quality, the reputation, and the ability to deliver the service, whether they are in the VA or outside the VA.

The veteran comes first in Veterans Choice. In the Caring for Our Veterans Act, the veteran comes first, not Members of the Senate, not employees of the VA. The veteran comes first, which is what we need to do.

I hope everyone will join Senator TESTER and me in seeing to it, when we get this to the floor—and we are trying every day—that they join us in helping pass the Care Act.

One last thing I want to mention about the Care Act is it also contains the funding necessary to complete the year for the Veterans' Administration in terms of health services. More importantly, it consolidates the stovepipes of funding in the VA so we no longer have this Mickey Mouse game, which we have all experienced for the last 5 or 6 years, where the VA is always running out of money.

The Congress has never cut off the VA. When we had the biggest shutdown 5 or 6 years ago—or potential shutdown for the government that we had, we passed bills that exempted the VA to demonstrate long and hard that we would never leave our veterans in need of healthcare coverage waiting because we couldn't act in the Congress, and that would happen today if that was threatening us.

I want to underline, this is not a matter of anybody threatening anybody. This is a matter of finishing the job for our veterans and seeing to it that the Veterans' Administration has the resources necessary to deliver the services to our veterans.

For those who can hear this plea—and it is a plea—understand I am coming before us today to say three things: One is thank you. Thank you to every Member of the Senate who voted with us to get us where we are today. We have passed 10 of the 11 bills we brought in this year for veterans' healthcare services. Thank you very much.

I say to Senator TESTER, as the ranking member, thank you for your cooperation. We have worked together to find a solution to every impasse we confronted throughout the year.

To the Senator from Alaska, who is presiding today and is a member of the committee, thank you for what you did for those veterans in need in our States that have limited access to healthcare, like Alaska. We need to make sure the Alaskan veteran has the same access and the same benefits they signed up for as one does in Georgia or in any other State.

Senator TESTER from Montana has worked so hard to see to it that rural America has the same type of access. There may not be as many doctors, there may not be as many VA facilities, but we can design a system that gives them the very best access and the very best care for that region where they choose to live.

That is our challenge. Our challenge in the VA is not to say: Well, you should have lived somewhere else. Our challenge is to say we should have concentrated more in the VA to see to it that where you live is the right place to be in terms of veterans' services, and we are going to do that.

Lastly, I thank Secretary Shulkin. He was approved 100 to nothing by the Senate. I believe I am right that he is the only Cabinet member who was confirmed by the Senate 100 to nothing. As everybody knows from watching us the last 8 or 9 months, we haven't agreed on much of anything. We haven't had any unanimous consent votes on hardly anything. We did with David Shulkin, and he has delivered, in response to that 100-to-nothing vote, time and time again, working for our veterans, helping to direct problems, helping to work with us together.

I look forward to next year, as we bring a close to the Care Act and pass it, moving forward with those new things we need to pay attention to.

I look forward to working with Senator TESTER from Montana and the members of the Democratic Party and the Republican Party in our committee.

Remember, we are veterans first. We are Americans first. God bless our veterans. May God bless the United States of America.

I yield to Senator TESTER.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Montana.

Mr. TESTER. Mr. President, I thank Senator ISAKSON for his words. I thank the Presiding Officer, who is currently sitting in the chair, for his work on the Veterans' Affairs Committee.

I want to talk a little bit about Chairman ISAKSON before I talk about the Care Act. Over the last year, I have been able to work with a great man from Georgia who has done great work. When we started out, we talked about doing stuff we could agree upon and set the stuff we disagree upon apart, and it has ended up where we have agreed on a lot of stuff, and we have been able to get a lot of stuff done.

I would just say, in a body that is full of impasse over this last year, Chairman ISAKSON has been a great guy to work with because the fact is, we have set aside the political labels, and we have worked for our veterans in that committee. It is not only JOHNNY and myself, but members on both sides of the aisle in that committee have worked very well together and communicated so very well to make sure we could take care of the needs of our veterans across this country, whether it was in rural America or whether it was in urban America, but our work is not done.

The Care Act Chairman ISAKSON talked about is a very important piece of legislation. It is a bipartisan compromise. It is a bill we all negotiated on, so not everybody got everything. There are always things in it that you wish would be better, regardless of where you are in the spectrum, but this program does a lot of good things for our veterans.

It, first of all, will eliminate the Veterans First Program and replace it with one that is much easier for veterans to navigate in a system that puts in place where the veterans can seek care. It puts that system in the hands of a veteran and their doctor.

This is a bill that passed out of committee 14 to 1, and it has 26 veterans service organizations, representing millions of veterans who have endorsed this bill. It is a good bill.

I wish the Veterans' Administration, which we worked so closely with on this bill, would come out and forcefully endorse it. I think that would help a lot.

What it does is it establishes a Veterans Community Care Program. It merges seven VA community care programs into one program, with one set of rules for both providers and the veterans. It puts the decision of where to seek care in the hands of the veteran and their doctor. No more one-size-fits-all eligibility.

If a local VA doesn't have the equipment for a certain test and there is not another VA locally that can provide that test, the vet can go to the community doc. If the roads to another VA facility are closed for snow, veterans could go to their local doctor rather than waiting for the roads to clear, which is a big issue in rural America.

If a nearer VA clinic has a type of doc a vet needs to see, but there is a community doc closer and the vet has a bad back, that vet can see that doc in that community, as an example. It offers convenient, walk-in care so vets can get care closer to home for minor illnesses.

Third-party administrators—also known as government contractors—will have a smaller role at the local level, and the local VA will have the flexibility of when to use them for scheduling so what makes more sense for the local VA will not be decided by bureaucrats in Washington.

The second thing it does is it improves accountability and trans-

parency of VA's spending. It requires the VA to give Congress more notice when funding levels of programs that impact veterans are running low. It forces the VA to put together a businesslike plan about how it is going to spend taxpayer dollars, and it gives Congress more visibility in the VA contracts. It requires accountability at the medical center, regional, and the Federal levels. If the clinic isn't brought back up to snuff, we know who has failed to do their job.

I could give you a timeline on what has been going on in the last 3 years with the Choice Program—not having enough money, having more than enough money, not having enough money. That will end when we pass this bill. Congress will be able to have the oversight over the Community Care Program that it needs.

It will give long-term certainty to our veterans because a lack of long-term certainty is devastating to those veterans, and it will give those who have served the consistency and the certainty they need. No more bandaids. We need a cure.

The third thing it does is it improves VA resources in healthcare. Veterans tell me, time and time again, once they get through the door, they love the care the VA gives them. I have been told by a number of veterans that VA has saved their lives. The problem has always been getting through the door, and the biggest reason for those delays to get through that door is workforce shortages.

So our bill incentivizes medical staff to work in rural and underserved areas and Tribal VA facilities. It deploys more mobile teams to provide additional care. It removes the barriers for veterans to access telemedicine, including mental health care, closer to home. It brings more nurses and heart and lung specialists to work at the VA and clinical staff to work at vet centers.

The answer to the VA is not privatization. It is to build the VA and use the private sector to fill in the gaps that the VA cannot provide. That is what this bill does.

It also expands the VA caregiver program to veterans of all areas and their caregivers. Right now, the VA caregiver program only applies to post-9/11 veterans. We have a whole lot of veterans—especially the folks from the Vietnam war—who are getting a lot older, and this caregiver program expansion to the veterans before 9/11 is absolutely critical.

So the bottom line is this: We have worked well on the committee. We have put out a good bill. We put out a bill that works for the taxpayer and, most importantly, for the veterans.

This bill is a long-term solution. We don't need another bandaid fix. The Care Act is our long-term solution. It provides the VA what it needs to hire staff for top-notch care. It provides an integrated network of community providers to fill in the gaps for that care.

It is a balance between those two, and the veterans win.

The VSOs are on board. They were part of the discussion on this bill. We talked to the VA extensively to make sure this bill would work for the VA, and they agreed.

As I said earlier, I would love to have the VA come out forcefully for this bill. I think it would help get it passed in this body.

One thing in closing. We are going to pass a temporary stopgap measure for our budget, and VA Choice funding will probably be a part of it. I will tell my colleagues that this is the last bandaid that I am willing to put on the Choice Program. We need a long-term solution, and if we don't get that long-term solution, we are not doing right by our veterans in this country.

With that, I would again like to thank Chairman ISAKSON for his leadership and for his good work on the VA Committee. When we come back here in 2018, hopefully we can get this bill passed early in the session because it is the right thing to do for our veterans.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

Mr. FRANKEN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to speak for as much time as I may consume.

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

FAREWELL TO THE SENATE

Mr. FRANKEN. Mr. President, this is my final speech on the floor of the U.S. Senate. I have come to the floor many times, as we all have. We come to the floor to cast our votes on bills and amendments. We come here to discuss and debate the issues that are important to our States and to the country. We introduce and explain legislation. We talk about our States and what we learned on our latest visit to a community health center, a farm, or a small business. What we don't talk about all that often is the work of all the men and women on our staffs who make all of this possible.

I have been fortunate to have had a dedicated, hard-working staff both in Washington and in Minnesota, and I have no doubt that they will go on to do great things and to serve our Nation well.

I am also very lucky to have a wonderful family who has stood by me throughout the good times and the tough times of being a Senator. As Senators, we have packed schedules. There are late nights. There are difficult votes on divisive issues and a lot of time invested in better understanding the challenges our constitu-

ents face every day. All too often, that important work doesn't leave enough time for our families. I am grateful for my wife, my children, and their spouses, who stood by me and who have helped me to do my work effectively.

Finally, as I leave the Senate, I take great comfort in knowing that my successor, Senator-designate Tina Smith, has a well-earned reputation for being a smart, diligent, hard-working public servant, and I have no doubt that Senator Smith will serve Minnesotans and all Americans exceptionally well.

When most people think about politics, they think about arguments—the arguments they have around the dinner table, the arguments they have online, and most of all, the arguments we have here in Washington. That is a big part of the reason why a lot of people just don't like politics.

Often, the debate here in Washington can sometimes seem arcane and tough to understand. Other times—especially in recent years—it can be so bitter that it doesn't even feel like we are trying to resolve anything, just venting our spleens at each other. I get that. I get why people want us to stop arguing and start doing stuff.

But since I am leaving the Senate, I thought I would take a big risk and say a few words in favor of arguments. After all, there is no single magic solution that can bring all 100 of us together because there is no one set of values that brought all of us here in the first place. I think many of my colleagues have heard me talk about what brought me to politics and what makes me a Democrat, and it is my wife Fran.

When she was 17 months old, her father, a decorated World War II veteran, died in a car accident, leaving her mom widowed at age 29 with five kids. There was one sibling younger than Franni, Bootsie, who was 3 months old. Franni's family made it—barely, but they made it—thanks to Social Security survivor benefits. Sometimes they had to turn the heat off in the winter. This was in Portland, ME. Sometimes—often—they were hungry because there wasn't enough food. But they made it.

Franni and her three sisters all went to college on combinations of scholarships and Pell grants. At the time, a full Pell grant paid for about 80 percent of a public college education, but today it only pays about 35 percent.

When Bootsie went to high school, my mother-in-law got a GI loan for \$300 and went to college. She got three more loans, graduated from college, and became an elementary school teacher. And because she taught title I kids—poor kids—all her loans were forgiven.

My brother-in-law went into the Coast Guard and became an electrical engineer.

Every member of Franni's family became a productive member of society and a member of the middle class.

They tell you in this country to pull yourself up by your bootstraps, but

first you have to have the boots. The Federal Government, through Social Security survivor benefits and Pell grants and the GI bill and title I, gave my wife's family the boots. That is why I am a Democrat. That is why I am a Democrat.

Over the years, I have heard Democrats and Republicans talk about their own values, the things they believe brought them to politics, the things that make them care about what happens here. I have learned so much from listening to the arguments we have in this country and the arguments we have here in this Chamber. I have learned from Republicans. I have learned to respect but not always agree with their opinions, and I have learned how their backgrounds can lead them to reach, in good faith, a conclusion that I never could have imagined. And, of course, I have learned so much from my fellow Democrats.

But the person I learned the most from is someone who isn't here. For 12 years, the seat I currently occupy was held by Paul Wellstone. As I have said before, Paul was a tireless, passionate champion for working families—for working families in Minnesota and across the Nation. He fought for veterans, for farmers, and for those who simply needed a voice.

Paul was my friend. Paul had a saying that I think perfectly represents the values and the principles for which he fought. He used to say: "We all do better when we all do better." That was Paul's creed. What Paul meant by that is that the whole country—the working poor, the middle class, and the well off—the whole country does better when each and every one of us is able to contribute to and participate fairly in our economy and in our democracy.

I think Paul was right, but not everybody does. Some people's values are different. Some people believe that those at the top are there for a reason and that they shouldn't have to concern themselves with what is going on in the lives of people who haven't been so lucky or even so accomplished. Some people believe honestly—honestly, legitimately, believe—that not everyone deserves to have the same standing in this country. They believe that your standing as a citizen should depend, in part, on where you were born or what you believe or whom you love or what you do for a living. Some people believe that at some fundamental level, we are all in this on our own. I don't agree with any of those values, but I respect that some people hold them, and that is why arguments matter.

When we argue, whether it is across the fence with your neighbor or on a cable news show or here on the floor of the Senate, it can help us sharpen our ability to articulate what we want and challenge us to examine our own views with a more critical eye and help highlight the choice for the American people, because, after all, in a democracy, the people get to choose.