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Senate

The Senate met at 10 a.m. and was called to order by the President pro tempore (Mr. HATCH).

PRAYER

The Chaplain, Dr. Barry C. Black, offered the following prayer:

Let us pray.

Almighty God, our faithful Father and Friend, take and use our lawmakers for Your glory. Fill them with Your wisdom, enabling them to make the tough decisions with complete confidence in Your guidance. Keep their lives unstained by any word or action that is unworthy of their best. Lord, give them clarity and understanding so that their labor will be acceptable to You. May they maintain the fidelity of those to whom much has been given and from whom much will be required.

We pray in Your sacred Name. Amen.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The President pro tempore led the Pledge of Allegiance, as follows:

I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

RECOGNITION OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mrs. HYDE-SMITH). The majority leader is recognized.

VA MISSION BILL

Mr. MCCONNELL. Madam President, today the Senate will begin considering the VA MISSION Act. It marks a major step forward for the VA system and the millions of heroes who rely on it for services.

The bipartisan reform legislation before us builds on the earlier progress of the Veterans Choice Act of 2014 and reaffirms a clear message: Delays at the

VA cannot stand between veterans and the medical care they need. The shortcomings of a Federal bureaucracy do not free our Nation from its promises to our All-Volunteer Armed Forces. Veterans deserve prompt, thorough care, period.

In the few short years since the creation of VA Choice, the program has seen important success. More than 2 million veterans have taken the opportunity to see private providers when the VA system couldn't meet their needs. In Kentucky, it helped more than 23,000 veterans in 2017 alone.

Thanks to the leadership of Chairman ISAKSON, this new legislation builds on this significant progress, continues it, and improves it in ways that will help veterans even more.

The VA MISSION Act will clear the path for veterans to receive greater healthcare choices. It will eliminate the wait time and distance requirements that keep veterans out of the driver's seat and empower them, in consultation with their respective physicians, to take charge of their own care. It will help prioritize and speed improvements to existing VA facilities. It will direct \$5.2 billion to fund the Veterans Choice Program, and it will establish more streamlined delivery of care through the veterans community care program.

The bill before us passed the House by an overwhelming bipartisan margin. It carries the support of the President and 38 veterans advocacy organizations. It is based on a simple idea: Promises made to those who sacrifice for our freedoms must be promises kept. Let's make good on these promises this week.

AMERICA'S WATER INFRASTRUCTURE ACT

Mr. MCCONNELL. Madam President, on another matter, this morning, the Environment and Public Works Committee is concluding its work on America's Water Infrastructure Act of 2018.

Chairman BARRASSO has led an open, bipartisan process that has generated a strong proposal. It builds on President Trump's infrastructure approach, encouraging local control over local priorities and leveraging Federal resources to ensure that each dollar spent goes to major water infrastructure improvements. It cuts redtape and empowers the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to break through bureaucratic backlogs.

Thanks to Senator BOOZMAN, it enhances the investments in our Nation's failing drinking water and waste water infrastructure.

My State of Kentucky contains more than 1,900 miles of navigable inland waterways. Our water resources support more than 13,000 jobs in the maritime industry. Paducah, KY, serves as the heart of America's inland waterways system, and Western Kentucky is also home to major water civil works projects like the Olmsted Locks and Dam and Kentucky Lock.

This bipartisan legislation is good news for communities throughout the Commonwealth. One provision, the Freedom to Fish Act, will help safeguard an important part of Kentucky's cultural heritage. Generations of Kentuckians have fished the Cumberland River and the tailwaters of the Barkley and Wolf Creek Dams.

I remember my dad and his friend taking us to fish there at a young age. They were experienced fishermen. The last thing they needed was advice from Federal bureaucrats on where to cast their lines, but, in 2012, in a typical display of Obama administration overreach, the Army Corps threatened to restrict access to these cherished waters. I didn't know anyone in Kentucky who thought it was a good idea. The farmers didn't, the anglers didn't, the area businesses relying on fishing tourism didn't. The Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife certainly didn't. So I worked with community leaders like my friend Lyon County

● This "bullet" symbol identifies statements or insertions which are not spoken by a Member of the Senate on the floor.



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