

of over 750,000 veterans conducted by Dr. Jonathan Perlin, the Under Secretary for Health at the VA, consistently found that veterans living in rural areas are in poorer health than their urban counterparts. Still, despite the fact that 23 percent of the Nation's veterans live in rural areas, the VA does not have a high-level office responsible for coordinating care to this vital constituency.

This is simply unacceptable. We need policies that address the plight of our rural veterans, and we need them now.

With that objective in mind, Senator THUNE and I recently introduced legislation that would significantly enhance our approach to rural veterans' health care. Thanks to the support of the 12 cosponsors of this legislation and to the bipartisan efforts of my colleagues on the Veterans' Affairs Committee who worked to ensure its fair, insightful, and constructive review, we were able to include many of this legislation's provisions as part of S. 2694, a broader legislative package that passed out of committee last week.

In keeping with the objectives of our original Rural Veterans Care Act, this legislation would create an Office of Rural Health within the Veterans Health Administration. The new office would be responsible for taking a number of steps aimed at improving the way we provide care to rural veterans. Specifically, the Office of Rural Health would be charged with conducting, promoting, and disseminating research into issues affecting rural veterans, and developing and refining policies and programs to improve care and services for rural veterans. Because nearly one in every four veterans is from a rural area, the creation of this Office of Rural Health is crucial if we are to live up to our promise to provide all of our Nation's veterans with high-quality services.

Through specifically designated officials in each of the country's 23 Veterans Integrated Service Networks, this office will have a real and effective presence in rural veterans communities. These individuals will serve as regional officers responsible for consulting on and coordinating research and policies in their respective service networks. Their insight into how to provide rural veterans in their areas with the best health care possible will be incredibly useful and will help expand the reach of the new office outside the beltway, and to all corners of the country.

The Office of Rural Health will also be required to conduct a study on the feasibility of expanding the use of fee-basis care, whereby the VA contracts its services out on a limited basis to third party providers. I continue to believe we should carefully explore every available option when it comes to improving access to care for veterans living in rural areas, and I am happy that this legislation will provide a way to do just that.

With almost one-quarter of our Nation's veterans living in rural commu-

nities, and with the obstacles they face with respect to accessing high-quality care so pronounced, it is obvious we need to do better. I am pleased that the Veterans' Affairs Committee has taken an important first step toward that goal, and I am committed to working with my colleagues in the Senate, with the VA, and with veterans across the country to build on this momentum. This legislation may not be the whole answer, but it is a start, and the dialogue we have helped to start on this critical issue is long overdue.

I want to thank Senators THUNE, AKAKA, BURR, MURRAY, BAUCUS, BURNS, CONRAD, DORGAN, PRYOR, LINCOLN, MURKOWSKI, THOMAS, and ENZI for cosponsoring the Rural Veterans' Care Act. I also want to thank Chairman CRAIG and his staff for working with me and the rest of the bill's sponsors to include a provision creating a new Office of Rural Health as part of S. 2694.

I know that each and every one of my colleagues deals with veterans issues and feels a deep sense of gratitude toward the brave men and women who have fought for our freedom. I hope we can join together in support of our rural veterans. We owe it to them to make sure our actions match our rhetoric when it comes to expressing our gratitude and fulfilling the promises we have made. Toward that end, I look forward to seeing this legislation passed by Congress and sent to the President for his signature.

ADDITIONAL STATEMENTS

125TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE FOUNDING OF WENTWORTH, SOUTH DAKOTA

• Mr. JOHNSON. Mr. President, today I wish to pay tribute to the 125th anniversary of the founding of the city of Wentworth, SD.

The first settlers came to Wentworth by horse or oxen-drawn wagons, and were mainly from Milwaukee, eastern Atlantic States, Minnesota, and Iowa. The land had few trees, and most of the settlers built and lived in sod houses. On December 15, 1880, the land was surveyed and platted for owner Rinaldo Wentworth and the town was later named for his father, George Wentworth.

In 1880 the first business—a grocery store—opened its door in Wentworth. In 1881, the first train came into Wentworth, in 1904 the first telephone line was installed, and in 1917 electric street lights were turned on. There were several hotels that operated in early Wentworth as well, including the Commercial Hotel, which is now on display at nearby Prairie Village.

Wentworth will be commemorating its anniversary with a celebration from June 30 through July 4. The town plans to hold golf tournaments, parades, softball tournaments, car shows, and fireworks. The 5-day event promises to be a great opportunity to celebrate such a historic milestone.

Even 125 years after its founding, Wentworth continues to be a vibrant and progressive community. I am proud to honor the accomplishments of the people of Wentworth, and congratulate them on this impressive achievement.●

TRIBUTE TO WILLIAM CHRISTOPHER VILLAR

• Mr. MARTINEZ. Mr. President, today I wish to share with you the story of a remarkable young man from Milton, FL. William Christopher Villar, by all surface accounts, was your typical 22-year-old. He was attending community college with the hopes of one day obtaining a degree in business. He was working at a job that he loved, and he had recently gotten engaged to his long time sweetheart, Heather Dieterich. His life was unfolding the way we hope that all of our children's lives will eventually unfold.

Certainly, it was not these things or even the fact that, as a young man, he was actively involved with his church that made him atypical. And it was not the fact that he was a star on the basketball court—making the All-Conference and All-State teams his senior year at Central High School in Santa Rosa County—a high school he entered after being home schooled for a number of years. Quite simply, it was his selflessness and his unyielding love for his family that set him apart.

Chris was the oldest of three boys. As such, he was fiercely protective of his younger brothers. There is a story the family tells about an accident that happened 12 years ago that illustrates this best: Chris and Jacob, his youngest brother, were riding in the back seat of their father's car when the driver of a large recreational vehicle, coming over the peak of the I-10 bridge between Santa Rosa and Escambia counties, failed to slow down for a disabled vehicle. The significantly larger vehicle collided with Villar's car with devastating force. Chris, in an instinctive moment and without thinking of his own safety, grabbed his 2-year-old brother Jacob—perched high in his car seat—and threw his own 10-year-old body over him to save him. That should tell you volumes about the kind of person Chris Villar was.

By and large, the people who knew Chris all said the same things about him: He was a "good boy" and he had been "raised right." That is a compliment we hear far too infrequently these days, but it is a testament to his parents. It should make them proud.

I wish I could tell you that the story ends there that this exceptional boy will one day become an exceptional man, an exceptional husband, and an exceptional dad. Unfortunately, on the evening of Thursday, June 15, Christopher Villar's life came to a tragic end when a car driven by a drunk driver crashed through the roof of his family's home. This was an avoidable tragedy. This is a grave reminder of the dangers of driving while under the influence.