

This program includes educating VA staff about how to identify risk factors for suicide, and training staffers in the appropriate ways to respond to crisis situations and prevent suicide among veterans. The bill also requires the VA to provide mental health care to veterans 24 hours per day, and requires that a suicide prevention counselor be available at every VA facility. These counselors will provide direct assistance to veterans, and will also work with local emergency rooms, police departments, mental health organizations, and veterans' service organizations to provide outreach to veterans who may be at risk for suicide.

Additionally, the bill requires the VA to provide outreach and education for veterans and their families to give them the necessary skills to cope with mental illness, to reduce the stigma associated with seeking treatment for mental illness, and to know when and how to seek suicide prevention assistance.

It is my fervent hope that the passage of this bill in the House of Representatives today means that the tragic death of young Joshua Omvig will not be in vain. I would like to commend Joshua's parents for their advocacy on the behalf of their son and all veterans, and thank Congressman LEONARD BOSWELL for his leadership on this issue. I strongly urge my colleagues to join me in voting for the Joshua Omvig Veterans Suicide Prevention Act, and I look forward to the passage of this critical legislation today.

Mr. MILLER of Florida. Mr. Speaker, I would inquire of the chairman if he needs additional time.

Mr. FILNER. I would ask for the courtesy of yielding 2 minutes to the gentleman from Colorado (Mr. SALAZAR).

Mr. MILLER of Florida. I yield 2 minutes to the gentleman from Colorado (Mr. SALAZAR).

Mr. SALAZAR. I thank the gentleman for yielding. And I thank the chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Committee for bringing this important issue up to our attention.

I have been a proud cosponsor of this legislation for 2 years, and I want to thank Mr. BOSWELL for his leadership.

This brings up an important point. It brings up an important point because we are now seeing some underfunding of the VA committee and of VA health care initiatives. We have heard today statistics of how now, today, Vietnam veterans are still being affected by post-traumatic stress disorder. We haven't even been able to touch the beginning of the iceberg.

So today, Mr. Speaker, it is important to make it clear what the leadership of this House, the people's House, has said. The leadership of this House today has said that the most important issue for the veterans to be addressed are the issues of health care, both shortfall and VA funding, and it is also an important issue that today we push forward for full funding of VA health care.

Mr. MILLER of Florida. I would urge all of my colleagues to support H.R. 327.

I thank Mr. BOSWELL for bringing this legislation to the floor. He is a fine

man, a great sponsor of this piece of legislation, and I urge all of my colleagues to vote in favor of it.

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

Mr. FILNER. Mr. Speaker, I just want to thank Mr. MILLER, the ranking member of the House subcommittee, for your courtesy today, for your leadership on these issues, and for bringing members of your caucus to the floor. I think it is very important that all of us have an understanding of these issues. And the more that we all understand it and communicate that to the American people, we are, I think, better as a Nation. So thank you for the cooperation and the support.

I think we all were moved by Mr. BOSWELL and Mr. BRALEY's presentations. In the name of Joshua Omvig, we ask for support from our colleagues.

Mr. LEVIN. Mr. Speaker, I rise in strong support of H.R. 327, the Joshua Omvig Veterans Suicide Prevention Act. I am proud to be a cosponsor of this important bill.

Estimates indicate that nearly 1,000 veterans receiving care from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) take their own lives each year. This should be a clear sign that more must be done to address the very serious and troubling issue of veterans' suicide. Many veterans continue to return from Iraq and Afghanistan with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other mental health concerns, and we must equip the VA with the information and resources they need in order to ensure that our veterans receive adequate care.

When this legislation was first brought to my attention earlier this year, I happened to come across an Associated Press news story about a young man from Minnesota who served as a U.S. Marine in Iraq. Upon returning home from Iraq, he experienced nightmares and paranoia, often re-living his combat experiences in his sleep. On January 11, 2007, he told staff at a VA hospital that he felt suicidal. He mentioned this again over the phone the next day to VA staff. Despite these direct pleas for help, no action was taken, and 4 days later, he killed himself in his Minnesota home. He was 25 years old.

H.R. 327 takes a number of important steps towards reducing the incidence of suicide among veterans. This legislation directs the Department of Veterans Affairs to develop a comprehensive program to regularly screen and monitor all veterans for risk factors of suicide, set up a tracking and counseling referral system to ensure all veterans found to be a suicide risk will receive the appropriate help, and provide education and training for all VA staff, contractors, and medical personnel who have interaction with veterans. The legislation would also provide 24-hour mental health care for veterans who are believed to be at risk for suicide, so that veterans could seek assistance whenever they need it.

Our Nation's veterans fight for us overseas, and deserve proper care when they return home. This includes educating VA staff, veterans and their families about PTSD and suicide prevention in order to encourage service members to seek mental health assistance when necessary. Now more than ever, as service members return home with PTSD and other mental health issues, it is essential that we provide adequate mental health care that

can help prevent suicide among our Nation's veterans.

I urge my colleagues to join me in supporting H.R. 327.

Mr. FILNER. 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 California (Mr. FILNER) that the House suspend the rules and pass the bill, H.R. 327, as amended.

The question was taken; and the Speaker pro tempore announced that the ayes appeared to have it.

Mr. FILNER. 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 and the Chair's prior announcement, further proceedings on this question will be postponed.

IMPROVING COMPENSATION BENEFITS FOR VETERANS IN CERTAIN CASES OF IMPAIRMENT OF VISION INVOLVING BOTH EYES

Mr. FILNER. Mr. Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and pass the bill (H.R. 797) to amend title 38, United States Code, to improve compensation benefits for veterans in certain cases of impairment of vision involving both eyes, and for other purposes, as amended.

The Clerk read the title of the bill.

The text of the bill is as follows:

H.R. 797

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

SECTION 1. ENHANCED COMPENSATION BENEFITS FOR VETERANS IN CERTAIN CASES OF IMPAIRMENT OF VISION INVOLVING BOTH EYES.

(a) SHORT TITLE.—This section may be cited as the "Dr. James Allen Veteran Vision Equity Act".

(b) ENHANCED COMPENSATION.—Section 1160(a)(1) of title 38, United States Code, is amended—

(1) by striking "blindness" both places it appears and inserting "impairment of vision"; and

(2) by inserting before the semicolon at the end the following: " , where the impairment in each eye is to a visual acuity of 20/200 or less or of a peripheral field of 20 degrees or less".

SEC. 2. USE OF NATIONAL DIRECTORY OF NEW HIRES FOR INCOME VERIFICATION PURPOSES FOR CERTAIN VETERANS BENEFITS.

(a) USE OF INFORMATION IN NATIONAL DIRECTORY OF NEW HIRES.—Chapter 53 of title 38, United States Code, is amended by adding at the end the following new section:

"§5320. Use of National Directory of New Hires for income verification purposes

"(a) INFORMATION FROM NATIONAL DIRECTORY OF NEW HIRES.—(1) The Secretary shall furnish to the Secretary of Health and Human Services, on a quarterly basis or at such intervals as may be determined by the Secretary, information in the custody of the Secretary for comparison with information in the National Directory of New Hires maintained by the Secretary of Health and Human Services pursuant to section 453 of the Social Security Act (42 U.S.C. 653), in

order to obtain the information in such directory with respect to individuals under the age of 65 who are applicants for or recipients of benefits or services specified in subsection (d).

“(2) The Secretary shall seek information pursuant to this subsection only to the extent essential to determining eligibility for benefits and services specified in subsection (d) and the amount of benefits specified in paragraphs (1) and (2) of that subsection for individuals under the age of 65.

“(3)(A) The Secretary of Health and Human Services, in cooperation with the Secretary, shall compare information in the National Directory of New Hires with information in the custody of the Secretary furnished pursuant to paragraph (1), and disclose information in that Directory to the Secretary, in accordance with this subsection, for the purposes specified in this subsection.

“(B) The Secretary of Health and Human Services may make a disclosure in accordance with subparagraph (A) only to the extent that the Secretary determines that such disclosure does not interfere with the effective operation of the program under part D of title IV of the Social Security Act.

“(4) The Secretary may use information resulting from a data match pursuant to this subsection only for the purpose of determining eligibility for benefits and services specified in subsection (d) and the amount of benefits specified in paragraphs (1) and (2) of that subsection.

“(5) The Secretary shall reimburse the Secretary of Health and Human Services for the additional costs incurred by that Secretary in furnishing information under this subsection. Such reimbursement shall be at rates that the Secretary of Health and Human Services determines to be reasonable (which rates shall include payment for the costs of obtaining, verifying, maintaining, and comparing the information).

“(b) NOTIFICATION TO BENEFICIARIES.—The Secretary shall notify each applicant for, or recipient of, a benefit or service specified in subsection (d) that income information furnished by the applicant to the Secretary may be compared with information obtained by the Secretary from the Secretary of Health and Human Services under subsection (a). The Secretary shall periodically transmit to recipients of such benefits additional notifications of such matters.

“(c) INDEPENDENT VERIFICATION REQUIRED.—The Secretary may not, by reason of information obtained from the Secretary of Health and Human Services under subsection (a), terminate, deny, suspend, or reduce any benefit or service described in subsection (d) until the Secretary takes appropriate steps to verify independently information relating to employment and employment income.

“(d) COVERED BENEFITS AND SERVICES.—The benefits and services specified in this subsection are the following:

“(1) Needs-based pension benefits provided under chapter 15 of this title or under any other law administered by the Secretary.

“(2) Parents’ dependency and indemnity compensation provided under section 1315 of this title.

“(3) Health-care services furnished under subsections (a)(2)(G), (a)(3), and (b) of section 1710 of this title.

“(4) Compensation paid under chapter 11 of this title at the 100 percent rate based solely on unemployability and without regard to the fact that the disability or disabilities are not rated as 100 percent disabling under the rating schedule.

“(e) LIMITATION WITH RESPECT TO INDIVIDUAL UNEMPLOYABILITY CASES.—In the case of compensation described in subsection

(d)(4), the Secretary may independently verify or otherwise act upon wage or self-employment information referred to in subsection (c) of this section only if the Secretary finds that the amount and duration of the earnings reported in that information clearly indicate that the individual is not qualified for a rating of total disability.

“(f) OPPORTUNITY TO CONTEST FINDINGS.—The Secretary shall inform the individual of the findings made by the Secretary on the basis of verified information under subsection (c), and shall give the individual an opportunity to contest such findings, in the same manner as applies to other information and findings relating to eligibility for the benefit or service involved.

“(g) SOURCE OF FUNDS FOR ADMINISTRATION OF SECTION.—The Secretary shall pay the expenses of carrying out this section from amounts available to the Department for the payment of compensation and pension.

“(h) TERMINATION OF AUTHORITY.—The authority of the Secretary to obtain information from the Secretary of Health and Human Services under subsection (a) expires on September 30, 2012.”.

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

“5320. Use of National Directory of New Hires for income verification purposes.”.

(c) EFFECTIVE DATE.—Section 5320 of title 38, United States Code, as added by subsection (a), shall take effect 270 days after the date of the enactment of this Act.

SEC. 3. EXTENSION OF AUTHORITY OF SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS TO PROVIDE AN EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANCE ALLOWANCE TO PERSONS PERFORMING QUALIFYING WORK-STUDY ACTIVITIES.

Section 3485(a)(4) of title 38, United States Code, is amended by striking “June 30, 2007” each place it appears and inserting “June 30, 2012”.

SEC. 4. PROVISION OF BRONZE REPRESENTATIONS OF THE LETTER “V” FOR GRAVE OF ELIGIBLE INDIVIDUAL BURIED IN PRIVATE CEMETERY IN LIEU OF GOVERNMENT-PROVIDED HEADSTONE OR MARKER.

Section 2306(d) of title 38, United States Code, is amended by adding at the end the following new paragraph:

“(5) In lieu of furnishing a headstone or marker under this subsection, the Secretary may furnish, if requested, a bronze representation of the letter ‘V’ to be attached to a headstone or marker furnished at private expense. The Secretary shall make available two sizes of such representations for such purpose.”.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the rule, the gentleman from California (Mr. FILNER) and the gentleman from Florida (Mr. MILLER) each will control 20 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from California.

GENERAL LEAVE

Mr. FILNER. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members may have 5 legislative days in which to revise and extend their remarks and to include extraneous material on H.R. 797, as amended.

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. SALAZAR). Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from California?

There was no objection.

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

As noted, this bill is “as amended.” And I want to thank the members on my committee on both sides of the aisle, particularly Mr. BOOZMAN of Arkansas and Mr. LAMBORN of Colorado, for their very constructive amendments. Mr. BOOZMAN will talk later on what he did, but we have extended the authorization for the work/study program at his request for 5 years, so thank you for your amendments to that. And we thank Ms. BALDWIN, who has brought this to our attention and is very committed to the health care of our veterans of this Nation.

So we are glad all to work together to get this to the House floor today. This has been introduced in previous Congresses, but we are glad it is on the floor now. It would allow veterans who receive veterans disability compensation for impairment of vision in one eye to be eligible to receive additional disability compensation for impairment of vision in the eye that is not service connected, where that impairment in each eye is to a visual acuity of 20/200 or less, or of a peripheral field of 20 degrees or less.

Suffice it to say that there was a great blind spot in the law that did not cover our veterans who would need the help.

It would direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and the Secretary of Health and Human Services to match and compare VA needs-based pension benefits data, parents’ dependency and indemnity compensation data, health care services data, and unemployability compensation data with the National Directory of New Hires, maintained by the Department of Health and Human Services, for the purpose of determining eligibility for such benefits and services.

□ 1600

It would extend authorization of the veterans work/study program until 2012 at the suggestion of Mr. BOOZMAN, and allows for a bronze “V” marker in lieu of a government-provided headstone or marker for burials in a private cemetery, at the suggestion of Mr. LAMBORN.

It would affect an estimated 5 percent of the 13,000 veterans who have service-connected blindness or loss of vision in one eye. As of April 2006, the Walter Reed Medical Center alone has treated 140 returning OEF/OIF service-members for visual injuries.

I urge Members to support the bill. It is the least we can do for our veterans.

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

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

I rise in strong support of H.R. 797, as amended, the Dr. James Allen Veteran Vision Equity Act. I thank my colleagues, Mr. HALL of New York, the chairman of the Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs Subcommittee, and Mr. LAMBORN of Colorado, the ranking member of that subcommittee.

I also thank the chairman, Mr. FILNER, and the ranking member, Mr. BUYER, for bringing this important legislation to the floor; and the prime sponsor, Ms. BALDWIN.

This bill would, in fact, allow veterans who receive a disability compensation for impairment in the vision of one eye to be eligible to receive additional disability compensation for impairment of vision in the eye that is not service connected.

This eligibility includes situations where the impairment in each eye is to a visual acuity of 20/200 or less, or a peripheral field loss of 20 degrees or less. This is the same definition of "legal blindness" adopted by all 50 States and the Social Security Administration.

The New Hires Act would save the government money by allowing the Secretary of the VA to consult with the Secretary of Health and Human Services regarding unemployment compensation data in order to determine the eligibility for VA needs-based pension benefits.

Also, CBO estimates that this section of H.R. 797, as amended, would save the taxpayers \$15 million over 10 years. Also included in H.R. 797, as amended, is a provision that extends the types of work study jobs found in section 3485(a)(4) for 5 years through June 30 of 2012.

Current law allows work study recipients to perform a variety of duties throughout VA, as well as veteran-related paperwork at their schools.

We also extend the provision for 6 months in Public Law 109-461 to prevent canceling benefits in the middle of a school year. I am pleased we are able to extend this provision even further in this bill.

The last provision of this bill provides families with the option of choosing a bronze "V" denoting veteran status, in lieu of a VA headstone by graves already marked by a private marker. Many private cemeteries do not allow a second marker on a grave because it complicates routine maintenance. Therefore, that bronze "V" would identify a veteran's grave in a manner that is universally acceptable, and meet the family's desire to honor the deceased veteran.

The bronze "V" would also be readily identifiable to anybody visiting the cemetery, and a standard way to identify veterans who choose not to use a VA-provided headstone.

Once again, I express my strong support for H.R. 797, as amended.

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

Mr. FILNER. Mr. Speaker, I yield 5 minutes to the gentlewoman from Nevada (Ms. BERKLEY) who is an aggressive advocate for the veterans not only in Las Vegas but across the Nation.

Ms. BERKLEY. Mr. Speaker, I want to thank Mr. FILNER and Mr. MILLER for their steadfast support for this legislation, and Ms. BALDWIN for bringing this to our attention for quite awhile now, waiting for us to act, and act we should.

As Mr. FILNER is well aware, having been to my congressional district, southern Nevada has one of the fastest growing veterans populations in the country, with nearly 218,000 veterans living in Clark County. And when I first started serving in Congress, I only had 160,000 veterans, so our veterans population has increased quite dramatically. It is even more important that former service men and women have the health care and benefits that they have earned.

I am a cosponsor of this legislation which would allow veterans who have complete loss of sight in one eye due to a service-connected injury to receive increased disability compensation if they lose sight in the other eye, regardless of whether that loss of sight is service connected.

For some reason, and I don't understand why, the VA has a higher threshold for determining blindness than any of the States and for the Social Security Administration. Because of this, veterans like my constituent, retired Army Major General Roy Kekahuna, are not covered for deteriorating vision in both eyes, even though they are considered legally blind.

Let us through this legislation demonstrate our true appreciation to our veterans for their sacrifice on behalf of this Nation by meeting our promise to provide them with proper health care and by passing this important piece of legislation.

Mr. MILLER of Florida. Mr. Speaker, I yield 3 minutes to the gentleman from Arkansas (Mr. BOOZMAN), the ranking member of the Economic Opportunity Subcommittee.

Mr. BOOZMAN. First of all, I would like to associate myself with the remarks that were said in the previous bill regarding the Suicide Prevention Act. Again, I just appreciate, being a member of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, I appreciate the hard work on that. It really does make us all proud.

Mr. Speaker, for years the VA has awarded service-connected disability ratings, including increased ratings for the loss of use for paired organs, such as hearing, when only one organ was affected by military service. The exception is the body's visual sensory organs and it is time to remove that inequity. This brings the VA in line with eye disability as done by everyone else in figuring eye disability.

As an optometrist and as an eye doctor I am very, very familiar with this and used to help figure these things all of the time, the loss of visual acuity in one eye on the other eye and the long-term effects of that stress. To me, ignoring any loss of visual acuity due to nonservice-connected causes just isn't rational.

I would like to thank Congresswoman BALDWIN for her excellent work in bringing this forward to the full House, and for her advocacy. She has been a real bulldog, and I mean that in a very nice way, in just really staying after this. And due to her efforts, she

has been instrumental in highlighting this problem. I have very much enjoyed working with her to improve the law to better serve veterans with visual impairments.

I am also pleased that the bill contains an amendment which was offered during the full committee markup to extend the VA work/study allowance benefits for 5 years. This is a follow-on to a short-term, 6-month extension we passed late last year, and will enable student veterans the ability to continue in a wide variety of work/study positions that directly benefit veterans while easing the workload on the Federal staff at VA and DOD.

Current law allows work/study participants to work up to 20 hours per week. Participants perform a variety of duties such as veteran-related paperwork at schools or VA offices. Some participants perform outreach services under the supervision of a VA employee. Others perform services at VA medical facilities or the offices of the National Cemetery Administration.

The VA work/study allowance is available to Americans training under many programs, such as the Montgomery GI bill, as well as the program for Vocational Training and Rehabilitation for Veterans with Service Connected Disabilities, and several other programs.

The work/study portion of H.R. 797 allows us to extend the work/study program without violating the PAYGO rules by using the offsets found elsewhere in the bill.

I really want to thank Chairman FILNER and Chairman BUYER for working together. This was a difficult thing to get all of the needs crafted together so we could kill two birds with one stone and rectify the visual impairment part.

Mr. Speaker, this is an excellent bill. I urge my colleagues to support H.R. 797.

Mr. FILNER. Mr. BOOZMAN, thank you again for having the initiative to extend the work/study program. You took the creativity of Ms. BALDWIN who was able to save money in this bill, not only meeting the needs of veterans, but by introducing a section to compare data which I hope you will explain, saved us money which can now be used to extend the work/study program for 5 years. Thank you for your amendment.

Mr. Speaker, I am honored to yield such time as she may consume to the gentlewoman from Wisconsin (Ms. BALDWIN), the author of this bill, who not only solved a problem but found some money.

Ms. BALDWIN. Mr. Speaker, I thank the chairman.

Mr. Speaker, I rise today in strong support of H.R. 797, the Dr. James Allen Veteran Vision Equity Act.

This bill fixes an inequity that has resulted in the denial of appropriate disability compensation to blinded veterans.

I wanted to share, first of all, the story of Dr. James Allen after whom

this legislation is named. Dr. Allen is a distinguished, caring professor of ophthalmology at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine. He has worked at our veterans hospital for nearly 33 years and treated countless eye patients, including many veterans who are blind.

One such patient is a Mr. Donald May. Don is a World War II veteran who lost his right eye in a hand grenade explosion. A few years ago, Mr. May began losing vision and ultimately became legally blind in his other non-service-connected eye. He applied to the Department of Veterans Affairs for help, but was denied further benefits. He was told that the current law in regard to paired organs did not apply to him even though he was legally blind in both his service-connected right eye and his non-service-connected left eye.

After Dr. Allen brought the plight of Don May and many other patients to my attention, I began to research why these veterans were being denied the benefits that I felt they deserved, benefits that I believed Congress intended to grant them. Through my work with the Blinded Veterans Association, we discovered that while the current paired organ statute covers blindness in theory, in practice few if any veterans have been able to qualify for the additional disability compensation under its terms.

Congress has rightly recognized that some human organs and limbs are designed to work in pairs: our legs, our kidneys, our lungs, our ears, and of course our eyes. In the instance of eyes, blindness in one eye profoundly affects depth perception, even if sight is fully retained in the other eye.

The paired organ statute was written to assist those veterans who experience a service-connected loss of a paired organ or limb. This statute recognizes the interdependency of paired organs, and endeavors to treat the combined disability created by a non-service-connected loss and injury or degeneration of the remaining paired organ or limb as though it, too, were the result of a service-connected disability. In general, the paired organ statute accomplishes this task except its treatment of loss of sight.

With regard to eyesight, the statute does not adequately define the term blindness, nor is any provision made for the impairment of vision in the non-service-connected eye short of blindness.

Rather than using a visual acuity of 20/200 or a loss of field of vision 20 degrees, as is the definition of legal blindness that has been adopted by all 50 States and the Social Security Administration, the Department of Veterans Affairs uses a much more restrictive 5/200 rating for legal blindness. I was asked to describe exactly what that 5/200 means. Really, in layman's terms, it is the equivalent to having light perception only, but the specific definition is somebody with the ability to see at 5 feet what most of the rest of us could see at 200 feet.

As a result, few if any blinded veterans are able to qualify for additional compensation under the paired organ statute.

□ 1615

H.R. 797, the Dr. James Allen Veteran Vision Equity Act, fixes this problem. It defines blindness as impairment of vision where the impairment is to a visual acuity of 20/200 or less or a peripheral field loss of 20 degrees or less. This change in the law would only affect a small percentage, estimated to be roughly 5 percent, of the 13,000-plus veterans who are service-connected for loss of vision in one eye.

Yet, such a change would send a powerful signal to our Nation's blinded veterans that their hardships are not forgotten. Indeed, our Nation's blinded veterans face significant challenges in the labor market.

The National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research found that for individuals with visual impairments, to the extent they are unable to read letters, that the employment rate is only 30.8 percent compared to 82.1 percent for people without disabilities. Given this employment trend, and the unique socioeconomic experiences of our veterans, it is even more urgent that Congress correct this one last inequity in the current paired organ statute and address the life-altering impact of blindness on our veterans.

I want to mention also that in compliance with our pay-as-you-go rules, section 2 of H.R. 797 fully offsets the cost of additional vision benefits. It directs the Veterans Secretary and the Secretary of Health and Human Services to match and compare VA needs-based pension benefits data, parents' dependency and indemnity compensation data, health care services data and unemployment data with the National Directory of New Hires maintained by HHS for the purpose of determining eligibility for such benefits and services. According to the GAO, the General Accountability Office, such data-matching project would help reduce fraud and waste within the VA system as it determines eligibility and benefits to those veterans thought to be unemployable, but who are indeed working.

I would like to thank Chairman FILNER, Subcommittee Chairman JOHN HALL, as well as Congressman BOOZMAN, Congressman SNYDER and Congressman MILLER for their unwavering support of this bill. I also want to thank the staff of the Veterans' Affairs Committee for helping advance this legislation.

H.R. 797 is a modest but very important step in restoring fair treatment to those blinded due to their service to our country and to further our commitment to them. Their sacrifices and service to this Nation should be matched by our desire to improve the quality of life for them and for their families.

I want to note that the Blinded Veterans Association has identified over

200 soldiers returning from Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan and Operation Iraqi Freedom who are blinded in one eye due to service-related injuries and could perhaps in the future benefit from this legislation.

I strongly urge my colleagues to support H.R. 797.

Mr. MILLER of Florida. Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the prime sponsor again of the piece of legislation she has. As my colleague Mr. BOOZMAN said earlier, she worked many long hours to bring this piece of legislation to the floor. I wish we could have done it sooner. I am glad to see it is moving forward at this time.

With that, I would like to recognize a new member to our committee. I yield 2 minutes to the gentleman from Colorado (Mr. LAMBORN).

(Mr. LAMBORN asked and was given permission to revise and extend his remarks.)

Mr. LAMBORN. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman for yielding.

I rise today in support of H.R. 797, the Dr. James Allen Veteran Vision Equity Act. I would like to thank Chairman FILNER, Ranking Member BUYER and my colleague Mr. HALL for their help in bringing this important legislation to the floor.

Mr. Speaker, I offered an amendment to this bill which would provide families the option of choosing a bronze V in lieu of a VA headstone for graves already marked by a private marker. I am happy to say that this amendment was accepted with bipartisan support during committee markup.

Many private cemeteries do not allow a second marker on a grave, but a bronze V would be accepted by all cemeteries and would identify a veteran's grave in the same manner as a VA headstone.

While not the intent of the amendment, it may also lead to a decrease in costs for the Veterans Affairs Department. The average cost of a VA headstone is about \$100. Last year, the VA provided 6,534 second markers for a total cost of about \$650,000 plus shipping. The cost for the same number of bronze V markers would have only been between \$148,000 and \$184,000.

Mounting of these second markers is at the family's expense, usually several times the cost of the stone. The bronze V, however, will avoid the need for professional mounting, thus reducing significant expenses for the veterans' families.

This amendment not only distinguishes our Nation's veterans on their headstones, but it also allows families to demonstrate their loved one's selfless service to our Nation in an efficient and cost-effective manner.

It provides a great solution to an unfortunate problem with the added bonus of saving money for veterans' families and the VA.

Mr. Speaker, this bill will help our veterans, and I urge my colleagues to vote in favor of H.R. 797.

Mr. FILNER. Mr. Speaker, again, I would like to thank Mr. LAMBORN for

this very important addition. It will give families added consolation, of course, on the burial of a loved one. So we thank you.

I have no further requests for time.

Mr. MILLER of Florida. Mr. Speaker, we have no further requests for time, and we yield back the balance of our time.

Mr. FILNER. Mr. Speaker, we urge support for H.R. 797, as amended, and I yield back our time.

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. SALAZAR). The question is on the motion offered by the gentleman from California (Mr. FILNER) that the House suspend the rules and pass the bill, H.R. 797, as amended.

The question was taken.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. In the opinion of the Chair, two-thirds being in the affirmative, the yeas have it.

Mr. FILNER. 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 and the Chair's prior announcement, further proceedings on this question will be postponed.

VETERANS' COMPENSATION COST-OF-LIVING ADJUSTMENT ACT OF 2007

Mr. FILNER. Mr. Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and pass the bill (H.R. 1284) to increase, effective as of December 1, 2007, the rates of compensation for veterans with service-connected disabilities and the rates of dependency and indemnity compensation for the survivors of certain disabled veterans.

The Clerk read the title of the bill.

The text of the bill is as follows:

H.R. 1284

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 "Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2007".

SEC. 2. INCREASE IN RATES OF DISABILITY COMPENSATION AND DEPENDENCY AND INDEMNITY COMPENSATION.

(a) RATE ADJUSTMENT.—Effective on December 1, 2007, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall increase, in accordance with subsection (c), the dollar amounts in effect on November 30, 2007, for the payment of disability compensation and dependency and indemnity compensation under the provisions specified in subsection (b).

(b) AMOUNTS TO BE INCREASED.—The dollar amounts to be increased pursuant to subsection (a) are the following:

(1) WARTIME DISABILITY COMPENSATION.—Each of the dollar amounts under section 1114 of title 38, United States Code.

(2) ADDITIONAL COMPENSATION FOR DEPENDENTS.—Each of the dollar amounts under sections 1115(1) of such title.

(3) CLOTHING ALLOWANCE.—The dollar amount under section 1162 of such title.

(4) DEPENDENCY AND INDEMNITY COMPENSATION TO SURVIVING SPOUSE.—Each of the dollar amounts under subsections (a) through (d) of section 1311 of such title.

(5) DEPENDENCY AND INDEMNITY COMPENSATION TO CHILDREN.—Each of the dollar

amounts under sections 1313(a) and 1314 of such title.

(c) DETERMINATION OF INCREASE.—

(1) PERCENTAGE.—Except as provided in paragraph (2), each dollar amount described in subsection (b) shall be increased by the same percentage as the percentage by which benefit amounts payable under title II of the Social Security Act (42 U.S.C. 401 et seq.) are increased effective December 1, 2007, as a result of a determination under section 215(i) of such Act (42 U.S.C. 415(i)).

(2) ROUNDING.—Each dollar amount increased under paragraph (1), if not a whole dollar amount, shall be rounded to the next lower whole dollar amount.

(d) SPECIAL RULE.—The Secretary of Veterans Affairs may adjust administratively, consistent with the increases made under subsection (a), the rates of disability compensation payable to persons under section 10 of Public Law 85-857 (72 Stat. 1263) who have not received compensation under chapter 11 of title 38, United States Code.

SEC. 3. PUBLICATION OF ADJUSTED RATES.

The Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall publish in the Federal Register the amounts specified in section 2(b), as increased under that section, not later than the date on which the matters specified in section 215(i)(2)(D) of the Social Security Act (42 U.S.C. 415(i)(2)(D)) are required to be published by reason of a determination made under section 215(i) of such Act during fiscal year 2008.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the rule, the gentleman from California (Mr. FILNER) and the gentleman from Florida (Mr. MILLER) each will control 20 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from California.

GENERAL LEAVE

Mr. FILNER. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members have 5 legislative days to revise and extend their remarks and include extraneous material on H.R. 1284.

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

There was no objection.

Mr. FILNER. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself as much time as I may consume.

Mr. Speaker, we all urge passage of H.R. 1284, the so-called Veterans' Compensation, COLA, Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act. It would direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to increase, effective December 1 of this year, the rates of veterans' compensation to keep pace with the rising cost of living in our Nation. The rate adjustment is equal to that provided on an annual basis to Social Security recipients and is based on the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Consumer Price Index.

Regardless, Mr. Speaker, of where any of us are on the current war in Iraq, we all believe that our returning young men and women who have served this Nation so courageously get all the attention, care, respect and love that we can give as a Nation. Nothing bothers any of us more than to see returning troops, whether it be at Walter Reed or any of our VA hospitals, have to face the bureaucracy that seems indifferent, and does not provide the services they need.

The cost of serving these veterans, which includes this annual COLA, is a continuing cost of war. We will have from Iraq and Afghanistan an increase in injuries and disabilities that will yield an increase in claims for compensation. Over 1.5 million servicemembers have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan without any end, it looks like, in sight, and the President calls for more troops. Therefore, the Veterans Administration, as well as the military hospitals, can expect a significant increase in the number of new claims for compensation and new demands on the health care system. I think that recent events have shown that neither system is adequately prepared for that onslaught, and, in fact, the systems are stretched to the breaking point.

We as a Congress, we as a Nation, have got to give our veterans all the care that they need, all the resources they need, and we as Congress have to provide accountability for the spending of those resources.

Let me say that certainly we on the Democratic side, and I am sure supported on the Republican side, have made major increases in the resources to our veterans care that is now demanded from our Nation. I am told that the budget resolution will have an additional \$6.6 billion over what we appropriated last year for the Veterans Administration.

You know that we appropriated an additional \$3.6 billion for fiscal year 2007, the year that we are in now, in the so-called continuing resolution, the biggest increase of any department in that continuing resolution.

The supplemental that we will be considering at the end of this week has \$3.5 billion for military and veterans health care; we say if you are going to deal with the cost of war, deal with the costs of the warrior.

So just in 60 days, Mr. Speaker, the new majority in the Congress has provided an additional \$13.5 billion for the care of our Nation's veterans, and that is a bigger increase than was totaled in the last 5 years combined.

So I think we are responding to the Walter Reed scandal. We are responding to the tragic suicides that came from indifference from the bureaucracy. We are responding to the needs of traumatic brain injury that have so increased in this war. We are responding to the needs of those who have post-traumatic stress disorder. We are responding to the needs of a Veterans Administration that is backlogged 600,000 disability claims.

So we are going to respond with the dollars. We also need to make sure we have accountability, and we will have more to say on that in the future.

Congress regularly enacts an annual cost-of-living adjustment for veterans compensation to make sure that inflation does not erode the purchasing power of veterans and their families who depend upon this income to meet their daily needs. This bill before us, in