

Unlike other military servicemembers, Merchant Mariners were not offered similar opportunities to participate in the G.I. Bill of 1945. H.R. 23 will provide long-awaited parity for these selfless individuals. It is unfortunate that after 60 years these Merchant Mariners have not been provided access to a benefit they deserve. In the spirit of fairness and equity, and in keeping with this Congress's recent and previous actions of providing long-awaited and most deserving recognition to forgotten groups of Americans who served and sacrificed during World War II, I urge passage of H.R. 23.

Today, the United States Merchant Marine continues its tradition of providing an essential component to our national security as the "fourth arm of defense." Our merchant ships bear the brunt of delivering military supplies overseas to our forces and allies. The stark lessons of 20th century conflict prove that a strong Merchant Marine is an essential part of American seapower.

It is time that we thank these brave men and women whose efforts contributed greatly to the success of the United States during the Second World War. I urge my colleagues to join me in supporting H.R. 23, which is sponsored by our colleague from California, Mr. FILNER, the chairman of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs.

Mr. SHAYS. Mr. Speaker, as a cosponsor of H.R. 23, I am pleased to support this legislation on the House floor today.

The duty performed by the U.S. Merchant Marines during World War II was courageous and vital to our national interest. H.R. 23 would direct the Department of Veterans Affairs to pay a monthly benefit of \$1,000 to U.S. Merchant Marine veterans who served in the Army and Navy Transport Services between December 7, 1941, and December 31, 1946, or to their survivors.

During World War II, the Army and Navy Transport Services delivered troops and supplies to the front lines. These men often put their lives in danger to keep supplies flowing, but Merchant Marine veterans were not granted benefits under the G.I. Bill of Rights that Congress enacted in 1945.

All those who served in the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force or Coast Guard were recipients of benefits under the G.I. Bill. The United States Merchant Marine regrettably was not included.

Mr. Speaker, I urge my colleagues to support this legislation.

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. 23, as amended.

The question was taken; and (two-thirds being in the affirmative) the rules were suspended and the bill, as amended, was passed.

The title was amended so as to read: "A Bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to establish the Merchant Mariner Equity Compensation Fund to provide benefits to certain individuals who served in the United States merchant marine (including the Army Transport Service and the Naval Transport Service) during World War II."

A motion to reconsider was laid on the table.

VETERANS' BENEFITS IMPROVEMENT ACT OF 2007

Mr. FILNER. Mr. Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and pass the bill (H.R. 1315) to amend title 38, United States Code, to provide specially adaptive housing assistance to certain disabled members of the Armed Forces residing temporarily in housing owned by a family member, as amended.

The Clerk read the title of the bill.

The text of the bill is as follows:

H.R. 1315

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' Benefits Improvement Act of 2007".

SEC. 2. PROVISION OF SPECIALLY ADAPTIVE HOUSING ASSISTANCE TO DISABLED MEMBERS OF THE ARMED FORCES RESIDING TEMPORARILY IN HOUSING OWNED BY A FAMILY MEMBER.

Section 2102A of title 38, United States Code, is amended—

(1) by redesignating subsections (d) and (e) as subsections (e) and (f), respectively; and

(2) by inserting after subsection (c) the following new subsection (d):

"(d) ASSISTANCE FOR MEMBERS OF THE ARMED FORCES.—The Secretary may provide assistance under subsection (a) to a member of the Armed Forces serving on active duty who is suffering from a disability described in subsection (a)(2) or (b)(2) of section 2101 of this title if such disability is the result of an injury incurred or disease contracted in or aggravated in line of duty in the active military, naval, or air service. Such assistance shall be provided to the same extent as assistance is provided under subsection (a) to veterans eligible for assistance under that subsection and subject to the limitation under subsection (c)."

SEC. 3. VISUAL IMPAIRMENT AND ORIENTATION AND MOBILITY PROFESSIONALS EDUCATION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM.

(a) ESTABLISHMENT OF PROGRAM.—Chapter 76 of title 38, United States Code, is amended by adding at the end the following new subchapter:

"SUBCHAPTER VIII—VISUAL IMPAIRMENT AND ORIENTATION AND MOBILITY PROFESSIONALS SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

"§ 7691. Authority for program

"As part of the Educational Assistance Program and subject to the availability of appropriations for such purpose, the Secretary shall carry out a scholarship program under this subchapter. The program shall be known as the Department of Veterans Affairs Visual Impairment and Orientation and Mobility Professionals Scholarship Program (hereinafter in this subchapter referred to as the 'Program'). The purpose of the Program is to increase the supply of qualified blind rehabilitation specialists for the Department and the Nation.

"§ 7692. Eligibility; agreement

"(a) ELIGIBILITY.—To be eligible to participate in the Program, an individual must be accepted for enrollment or enrolled (as described in section 7602 of this title) as a full-time or part-time student in a field of education or training described in subsection (b).

"(b) QUALIFYING FIELDS OF EDUCATION OR TRAINING.—A field of education or training described in this subsection is education or training leading to—

"(1) a degree or certificate in visual impairment or orientation and mobility, or a

dual degree or certification in both such areas; and

"(2) appointment or retention in a position under section 7401 of this title.

"(c) AGREEMENT.—(1) An agreement between the Secretary and a participant in the Program shall (in addition to the requirements set forth in section 7604 of this title) include the following:

"(A) The Secretary's agreement to provide the participant with a scholarship under the Program for a specified number (from one to three) of school years during which the participant pursues a course of education or training described in subsection (b) that meets the requirements set forth in section 7602(a) of this title.

"(B) The participant's agreement to serve as a full-time employee in the Veterans Health Administration for a period of three years (hereinafter in this subchapter referred to as the 'period of obligated service') during the six-year period beginning on the date the participant completes the education or training and receives a degree or certificate described in subsection (b)(1).

"(C) The participant's agreement to serve under subparagraph (B) in a Department facility selected by the Secretary.

"(2) In a case in which an extension is granted under section 7673(c)(2) of this title, the number of years for which a scholarship may be provided under the Program shall be the number of school years provided for as a result of the extension.

"(3) In the case of a participant who is a part-time student, the period of obligated service shall be reduced in accordance with the proportion that the number of credit hours carried by such participant in any such school year bears to the number of credit hours required to be carried by a full-time student in the course of training being pursued by the participant, but in no event to less than one year.

"§ 7693. Scholarship

"(a) SCHOLARSHIP.—A scholarship provided to a participant in the Program for a school year shall consist of payment of the tuition (or such portion of the tuition as may be provided under subsection (b)) of the participant for that school year and payment of other reasonable educational expenses (including fees, books, and laboratory expenses) for that school year.

"(b) AMOUNTS.—The total amount of the scholarship payable under subsection (a)—

"(1) in the case of a participant in the Program who is a full-time student, may not exceed \$15,000 for the equivalent of one year of full-time coursework; and

"(2) in the case of a participant in the Program who is a part-time student, shall bear the same ratio to the amount that would be paid under paragraph (1) if the participant were a full-time student in the course of education or training being pursued by the participant as the coursework carried by the participant to full-time coursework in that course of education or training.

"(c) LIMITATIONS ON PERIOD OF PAYMENT.—(1) The maximum number of school years for which a scholarship may be paid under subsection (a) to a participant in the Program shall be six school years.

"(2) A participant in the Program may not receive a scholarship under subsection (a) for more than the equivalent of three years of full-time coursework.

"(d) PAYMENT OF EDUCATIONAL EXPENSES BY EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS.—The Secretary may arrange with an educational institution in which a participant in the Program is enrolled for the payment of the educational expenses described in subsection (a). Such payments may be made without regard to subsections (a) and (b) of section 3324 of title 31.

“(e) FULL-TIME COURSEWORK.—For purposes of this section, full-time coursework shall consist of the following:

“(1) In the case of undergraduate coursework, 30 semester hours per undergraduate school year.

“(2) In the case of graduate coursework, 18 semester hours per graduate school year.

“§ 7694. Obligated service

“(a) IN GENERAL.—Each participant in the Program shall provide service as a full-time employee of the Department for the period of obligated service provided in the agreement of the participant entered into under section 7604 of this title. Such service shall be provided in the full-time clinical practice of such participant’s profession or in another health-care position in an assignment or location determined by the Secretary.

“(b) DETERMINATION OF SERVICE COMMENCEMENT DATE.—(1) Not later than 60 days before a participant’s service commencement date, the Secretary shall notify the participant of that service commencement date. That date is the date for the beginning of the participant’s period of obligated service.

“(2) As soon as possible after a participant’s service commencement date, the Secretary shall—

“(A) in the case of a participant who is not a full-time employee in the Veterans Health Administration, appoint the participant as such an employee; and

“(B) in the case of a participant who is an employee in the Veterans Health Administration but is not serving in a position for which the participant’s course of education or training prepared the participant, assign the participant to such a position.

“(3)(A) In the case of a participant receiving a degree from a school of medicine, osteopathy, dentistry, optometry, or podiatry, the participant’s service commencement date is the date upon which the participant becomes licensed to practice medicine, osteopathy, dentistry, optometry, or podiatry, as the case may be, in a State.

“(B) In the case of a participant receiving a degree from a school of nursing, the participant’s service commencement date is the later of—

“(i) the participant’s course completion date; or

“(ii) the date upon which the participant becomes licensed as a registered nurse in a State.

“(C) In the case of a participant not covered by subparagraph (A) or (B), the participant’s service commencement date is the later of—

“(i) the participant’s course completion date; or

“(ii) the date the participant meets any applicable licensure or certification requirements.

“(4) The Secretary shall by regulation prescribe the service commencement date for participants who were part-time students. Such regulations shall prescribe terms as similar as practicable to the terms set forth in paragraph (3). (c)

“(c) COMMENCEMENT OF OBLIGATED SERVICE.—(1) Except as provided in paragraph (2), a participant in the Program shall be considered to have begun serving the participant’s period of obligated service—

“(A) on the date, after the participant’s course completion date, on which the participant (in accordance with subsection (b)) is appointed as a full-time employee in the Veterans Health Administration; or

“(B) if the participant is a full-time employee in the Veterans Health Administration on such course completion date, on the date thereafter on which the participant is assigned to a position for which the participant’s course of training prepared the participant.

“(2) A participant in the Program who on the participant’s course completion date is a full-time employee in the Veterans Health Administration serving in a capacity for which the participant’s course of training prepared the participant shall be considered to have begun serving the participant’s period of obligated service on such course completion date.

“(d) COURSE COMPLETION DATE DEFINED.—In this section, the term ‘course completion date’ means the date on which a participant in the Program completes the participant’s course of education or training under the Program.

“§ 7695. Repayment for failure to satisfy requirements of agreement

“(a) IN GENERAL.—An individual who receives educational assistance under this subchapter shall repay to the Secretary an amount equal to the unearned portion of such assistance if the individual fails to satisfy the requirements of the agreement entered into under section 7604 of this title, except in circumstances authorized by the Secretary.

“(b) AMOUNT OF REPAYMENT.—The Secretary shall establish, by regulations, procedures for determining the amount of the repayment required under this subsection and the circumstances under which an exception to the required repayment may be granted.

“(c) WAIVER OR SUSPENSION OF COMPLIANCE.—The Secretary shall prescribe regulations providing for the waiver or suspension of any obligation of an individual for service or payment under this subchapter (or an agreement under this subchapter) whenever noncompliance by the individual is due to circumstances beyond the control of the individual or whenever the Secretary determines that the waiver or suspension of compliance is in the best interest of the United States.

“(d) OBLIGATION AS DEBT TO UNITED STATES.—An obligation to repay the Secretary under this section is, for all purposes, a debt owed the United States. A discharge in bankruptcy under title 11 does not discharge a person from such debt if the discharge order is entered less than five years after the date of the termination of the agreement or contract on which the debt is based.”

(b) CLERICAL AMENDMENT.—The tables of sections at the beginning of such chapter is amended by inserting after the items relating to subchapter VII the following new items:

“SUBCHAPTER VIII—VISUAL IMPAIRMENT AND ORIENTATION AND MOBILITY PROFESSIONALS SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

“7691. Authority for program.

“7692. Eligibility; agreement.

“7693. Scholarship.

“7694. Obligated service.

“7695. Repayment for failure to satisfy requirements of agreement.”

(c) CONFORMING AMENDMENTS.—Such chapter is further amended—

(1) in section 7601(a)—

(A) in paragraph (4), by striking “and” at the end;

(B) in paragraph (5), by striking the period and inserting “; and”; and

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

“(6) The Visual Impairment and Orientation and Mobility Professionals Scholarship Program provided for in subchapter VIII of this chapter.”;

(2) in section 7602—

(A) in subsection (a)(1)—

(i) by striking “or VI” and inserting “VI, or VIII”; and

(ii) by striking “or for which a scholarship may be awarded under subchapter VI of this

chapter” and inserting “for which a scholarship may be awarded under subchapter VI of this chapter, or for which a scholarship may be awarded under subchapter VIII of this chapter”; and

(B) in subsection (b), by striking “or VI” and inserting “VI, or VIII”;

(3) in section 7603(a)(1), by striking “or VI” and inserting “VI, or VIII”; and

(4) in section 7604, by striking “or VI” each place it appears and inserting “VI, or VIII”.

(d) EFFECTIVE DATE.—The Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall implement subchapter VIII of chapter 76 of title 38, United States Code, as added by subsection (a), not later than six months after the date of the enactment of this Act.

SEC. 4. VETERANS’ REEMPLOYMENT RIGHTS REPORT IMPROVEMENT.

(a) ADDITIONAL REPORT REQUIREMENTS.—Section 4332 of title 38, United States Code, is amended—

(1) by striking “The Secretary shall” and inserting “(a) REPORT REQUIRED.—The Secretary shall”;

(2) by redesignating paragraphs (4) through (6) as paragraphs (5) through (7), respectively, and inserting after paragraph (3) the following new paragraph (4):

“(4) The number of cases reviewed by the Secretary of Defense under the National Committee for Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve of the Department of Defense during the fiscal year for which the report is made.”

(3) in paragraph (5), as so redesignated, by striking “or (3)” and inserting “(3), or (4)”;

(4) by redesignating paragraph (7), as so redesignated, as paragraph (8), and inserting after paragraph (6) the following new paragraph (7):

“(7) An indication of which of the cases reported on pursuant to paragraphs (1), (2), (3), and (4) are disability-related.”

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

“(b) UNIFORM CATEGORIZATION OF DATA.—The Secretary shall coordinate with the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, the Attorney General, and the Special Counsel to ensure that the information required to be submitted as part of the report under subsection (a) is categorized in a uniform way.

“(c) PROVISION OF INFORMATION.—The Secretary shall provide the information contained in the report required under subsection (a) to the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, the Attorney General, and the Special Counsel.”

(b) EFFECTIVE DATE.—The amendments made by this section shall apply with respect to a report submitted after the date of the enactment of this Act.

SEC. 5. INCREASE IN NUMBER OF MEMBERS OF ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON VETERANS EMPLOYMENT, TRAINING, AND EMPLOYER OUTREACH.

Section 4110(c)(1) of title 38, United States Code, is amended by striking “15” and inserting “16”.

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

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from California.

GENERAL LEAVE

Mr. FILNER. Mr. Speaker, on this bill, H.R. 1315, and the previous bill, H.R. 23, I would ask unanimous consent that all Members have 5 legislative days within which to revise and extend their remarks and include extraneous material.

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 such time as I may consume.

Mr. Speaker, I am glad that my colleagues on the committee were able to work together to craft this important piece of legislation. The Chair of our Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN, and her ranking member, Mr. BOOZMAN, provided really strong bipartisan leadership that was important in this bill. As I said when starting this package of bills, we must never forget the great debt we owe to all of them. We have to remember the courage and sacrifice demonstrated daily by those who serve our Nation.

Mr. Speaker, when our servicemembers return home, it is our solemn obligation to protect and serve them with the same commitment and dedication which they protected and served us. H.R. 1315, as amended, would contribute to just that level of commitment.

Under current law, transitioning disabled servicemembers who are temporarily living in housing owned by a family member are barred from receiving financial assistance to make necessary adaptations to their housing. This bill before us clarifies this point of law and ensures those veterans have the resources necessary to enjoy a comfortable and independent lifestyle.

This legislation creates a scholarship for students interested in earning a degree or certification in blind rehabilitation. In return for these scholarships, these students would provide 3 years of service to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. The effect of this program will be a needed staff increase to meet the growing needs of our vision-impaired and blind veterans.

I must say, Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN, we ought to look at this for some other needs of the VA, whether it is nursing or psychiatry or whatever. This way of encouraging and incentivizing those who could serve our veterans is a really fine approach.

The bill will, furthermore, bring more efficiency and accountability to the veteran employment process by facilitating greater coordination among the U.S. Departments of Veterans Affairs, Defense, and Labor. It allows for a more transparent view of data concerning complaints submitted by the National Guard and Reservists regarding difficulty obtaining employment.

Ensuring that our servicemembers are afforded a seamless transition from active duty to civilian life is an issue that we in the committee are keenly aware of, and I am glad to see needed language in this bill.

Finally, this bill corrects a technical error in current law to increase the U.S. Department of Labor's Advisory Committee on Veterans Employment Training and Employer Outreach by one representative from the existing 15.

We all stand united here in this House in caring for our veterans, and I urge my colleagues to support H.R. 1315, as amended.

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

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

Mr. Speaker, H.R. 1315, as amended, contains several important provisions to improve the lives of servicemembers and veterans.

First, severely injured servicemembers would be able to benefit from VA's specially adapted housing program prior to discharge. I appreciate Chairwoman HERSETH SANDLIN's vigilance and leadership in this area in bringing this forward.

Second, DOD, the Department of Labor, the Attorney General, the Office of Special Counsel and VA would be required to adapt common reporting criteria regarding servicemembers' employment rights under the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act, USERRA. Again, I appreciate Mr. REICHERT for his hard work in bringing this forward. I think this is an excellent provision.

Third, VA would be authorized to establish scholarship programs for pursuing degrees in rehabilitation for the visually impaired. Ms. SHEILA JACKSON-LEE also did a good job in bringing this forward. This is something that I am very, very familiar with in the sense that I am an optometrist and have had the opportunity to visit, not to visit, to deal with these types of patients many times in the past. This is something we definitely need to do.

Mr. Speaker, I thank Chairwoman HERSETH SANDLIN for her bipartisan leadership on this excellent bill, and I urge my colleagues to support H.R. 1315, as amended.

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

Mr. FILNER. Mr. Speaker, I yield such time as she may consume to the gentlewoman from South Dakota (Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN), our Chair of the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, who is the energetic, articulate, aggressive and fine spokesman for veterans.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Mr. Speaker, I thank our distinguished chairman for yielding.

Mr. Speaker, I rise in strong support of H.R. 1315, the Veterans' Benefits Improvement Act of 2007. As the sponsor of H.R. 1315, I want to thank Chairman FILNER and Ranking Member BUYER, as well as my good friend subcommittee Ranking Member BOOZMAN, for their strong leadership and unwavering dedication to our veterans and for working hard to craft this bipartisan bill.

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I would also like to thank Congresswoman SHEILA JACKSON-LEE of Texas and Congressman DAVE REICHERT of Washington and Congressman TIM WALZ of Minnesota who have contributed substantially to this important legislation.

As more and more of our troops are deployed in missions around the globe, additional steps must be taken to promote and protect the health and welfare of our veterans. Their honorable, courageous and patriotic service demands no less. In light of increasing numbers of disabled veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, the already urgent demand to pass legislation to meet the needs of these new veterans is rising.

Mr. Speaker, this legislation would provide specially adaptive housing assistance to disabled servicemembers who have not yet been discharged from active duty and therefore have not reached veteran status. Under current law, a temporary grant is available to disabled veterans who are or will be temporarily residing in a home owned by a family member. Our original intent in the last Congress was to allow servicemembers in transition prior to discharge to also use this benefit. However, the law, as currently written, does not qualify transitioning servicemembers for these housing grants. This legislation seeks to clarify congressional intent and provide assistance up to \$14,000 to adapt the family member's home to meet the transitioning servicemember's special needs.

In addition, this legislation would direct the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs to establish a scholarship program for students seeking a degree or certificate in blind rehabilitation under the Health Professional Education Assistance program. In exchange for the scholarship award, students will be required to work for 3 years in a health care facility within the Department of Veterans Affairs.

This bill would also require the Secretary of the Department of Labor and the Secretary of the Department of Defense to coordinate their sharing of and reporting on the complaint data filed by National Guard and Reservists facing difficulty in obtaining employment. It would require the use of uniform categories in tracking and reporting the data, including the difficulty of obtaining employment experienced by veterans with service-connected disabilities. These provisions will enable Congress to better identify trends in the reemployment challenges faced by our returning Guard and Reserve forces, and the corrective actions needed to ease their transition back into the civilian workforce.

Finally, H.R. 1315 would add a representative from the National Governors Association to the existing 15-member Advisory Committee on Veterans Employment, Training and Employer Outreach located under the auspices of the Department of Labor. This has been a priority for both the chairman and the ranking member of the full committee.

During the last Congress, we passed legislation which became Public Law 109-46 that was intended to add the National Governors Association representative to the Advisory Committee

on Veterans Employment, Training and Employer Outreach. However, a technical error did not increase the total authorized membership to 16, preventing the National Governors Association from being added to the Advisory Committee on Veterans Employment, Training and Employer Outreach.

In summary, this bill will provide our injured servicemembers the resources needed to live with the comfort and independence they deserve, expand education programs to more effectively address the rehabilitative needs of our veterans, bolster reemployment aid for returning veterans, and strengthen the advisory committee membership within the Department of Labor.

I commend the leadership of Chairman FILNER and certainly the great bipartisan working relationship that Mr. BOOZMAN and I have enjoyed over the last two Congresses. I urge my colleagues to vote favorably on the final passage of H.R. 1315.

Mr. BOOZMAN. Mr. Speaker, I yield the gentleman from Washington (Mr. REICHERT), one of the authors of a portion of the bill, such time as he may consume.

Mr. REICHERT. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman for yielding and thank both sides of the aisle on this great piece of legislation. It truly is an honor to be here this afternoon to speak on it on behalf of our veterans across the world.

I am very pleased that part of the language that I have been working on, along with other friends here in the House of Representatives, works to make sure that our returning veterans have a job, make sure that their families are taken care of.

I was in the Air Force Reserve for 6 years. That was a long time ago. I was never called to active duty. I worked for the sheriff's office then, and even back in the early 1970s, as I served our country in the Air Force and served our community on the streets as a police officer, I never had to worry when I served my one weekend a month or my 2 weeks every year that my employer would get upset with me and say, You know what, we can't support you here as you support our country and our troops across the world serving our country; we need you here every day. In fact, it was just the opposite. The sheriff's office said, We are proud to have you as a member of the Air Force Reserve. We are proud to have you come back and serve with us and have you continue to serve in the Air Force Reserve. And when I became sheriff later on in 1997, and after 2001, still serving as the sheriff in King County, we made sure that our Guard and Reserves had a job.

And I could see it in the eyes of their spouses and their children and the rest of their family, because they felt loved, they felt cared for, they felt comfortable to know that when their loved one returned, they had a job.

Imagine for a moment that you started a family, you started a busi-

ness, you have employment, you have a profession, and all of a sudden it is taken away. When you return, it is gone. Your family has no job. You have no income. You are looking at maybe selling your house, selling your car. Health insurance might not be available. All of these things are things that our veterans in the last few years had to deal with upon their return. This bill fixes that.

We are able to help them make sure that they have employment when they return from serving our country and keeping us free. I urge all of my colleagues to vote in favor of this legislation. What an honor it is to be here again today to speak on behalf of our veterans across the world.

Mr. FILNER. Mr. Speaker, I yield 5 minutes to another great and energetic advocate for veterans, the gentlewoman from Texas (Ms. JACKSON-LEE).

Ms. JACKSON-LEE of Texas. Mr. Speaker, this gives me an opportunity for the first time to rise and thank Chairman FILNER for the enthusiastic and passionate and newfound leadership that he has given to the Veterans' Affairs Committee. We thank him for being a beloved member of the veterans community. All over the Nation veterans are celebrating his chairmanship, and I thank him very much for his leadership, his bipartisan leadership with the ranking member of this committee.

And let me thank Chairwoman HERSETH SANDLIN for her leadership; and Mr. BOOZMAN, thank you. This whole committee draws the affection of Members from both sides of the aisle, and both of you exhibit the kind of leadership that we and the veterans can be proud of.

I rise to support H.R. 1315 and acknowledge the many sections of the bill, which includes section 2, where the bill adopts Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN's legislation dealing with housing; and section 3, where Mr. WYNN of Maryland's legislation is adopted dealing with mortgage foreclosure; and section 5, which addresses the legislation of Mr. REICHERT, which is so very important about employing our veterans.

I am proud that the basis for the new program dealing with the blind is based upon my bill, Visual Impairment Specialist Training Act. This VISTA act responds to the increasing numbers of veterans and soldiers who are now returning from the battlefield with vision injuries. I am proud that my legislation was strongly supported by Chairman FILNER; Mr. MICHAUD, chairman of the Subcommittee on Health; and the co-chairs, as I have mentioned, of the Congressional Vision Caucus, Mr. GENE GREEN of Texas and Ms. ROSLEHTNEN of Florida.

This legislation is also supported by the Blind Veterans of America, an organization chartered by Congress in 1958, which has been for nearly 50 years the only veterans service organization exclusively dedicated to serving America's blind and visually impaired veterans.

Let me explain what this legislation does. We establish here and now an educational assistance program for persons pursuing training in blind rehabilitation. I thank the chairman for citing this legislation as a possible model for nurses and psychologists that may be needed as we move in the future.

There are approximately 160,000 legally blind veterans in the United States, but only 35,000 are currently enrolled in the Veterans Health Administration's services. It is estimated that there are over 1 million low-vision veterans in the United States, and incidence of blindness among the total veteran population of 26 million are expected to increase by about 40 percent in the next 4 years. This is because the most prevalent causes of legal blindness and low vision are age-related, and the average age of the veteran population is increasing. The current age is about 80 years old.

In addition, we know that there will be veterans coming home, because of the IED injuries in Iraq and Afghanistan, with injuries impacting their vision.

Let me also acknowledge the specifics of this legislation. It mandates that the Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall provide financial assistance to students enrolled in a program of study leading to a degree or certificate in visual impairment and/or orientation and mobility at an accredited educational institution in the U.S., provided they agree with the applicable requirements. As I said, the purpose of this scholarship program is to increase the supply of qualified blind rehabilitation specialists for the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Nation. It requires the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to widely publicize this scholarship program to colleges and universities across the Nation, especially institutions with large numbers of Hispanic students and HBCUs, Historically Black Colleges. This is particularly helpful to the minority population who are interested in the field of vision rehabilitation.

To apply and participate in this scholarship program, an applicant shall submit to the Secretary, or his designee, an application and agree to serve a 3-year period of obligated service in the Department of Veterans Affairs. This is the crux of the legislation, so that we have a mandatory pool of those individuals helping the veterans as they move forward.

The maximum award for any full-time student per academic year may not exceed \$15,000. The maximum award for any part-time student shall be determined in proportion to the amount that would be the case if the student were full time. For any student, however, the total amount of assistance may not exceed \$45,000.

This is good news. It trains individuals, gives them a scholarship, and it doesn't burden the Federal Government. Why, because the debt is owed to

the United States Government and therefore it cannot be discharged because of bankruptcy.

To conclude my remarks, I ask that my colleagues look carefully at this hopefully innovative approach to helping our veterans and our returning soldiers who will be in great need from the injuries they have experienced. I thank the bipartisan leadership of this committee and ask my colleagues to support the bill.

Mr. Speaker, I proudly rise to strongly support H.R. 1315, the "Veterans' Benefit Improvement Act of 2007." I enthusiastically support this legislation because it keeps faith with the men and women who have worn the uniform in service to our country. Let me express my appreciation to Mr. FILNER and Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN, the Chairman of the Veterans Affairs Committee and the Chairwoman of the Economic Opportunity Subcommittee, and to their respective ranking members, Mr. BUYER and Mr. BOOZMAN, for their perseverance in shepherding this legislation to the House floor.

Mr. Speaker, H.R. 1315 consists of five main sections. Section 2 of the bill adopts Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN's legislation providing for specially adaptive housing (SAH) assistance to disabled servicemembers residing temporarily in housing owned by a family member. Under current law, a temporary grant may be available to veterans who are or will be temporarily residing in a home owned by a family member. This assistance, allowable up to \$14,000, may be used to adapt the family member's home to meet the veteran's special needs at that time.

Section 5 of the bill, which is based on a proposal by Mr. REICHERT of Washington, requires the Secretary of Labor to provide Congress an annual report on veterans' reemployment rights. Section 6 adds an additional representative from the National Governor's Association to the existing 15 member Advisory Committee on Veterans Employment, Training and Employer Outreach within the U.S. Department of Labor.

Each of these provisions is a useful, constructive, and welcome legislative initiative. Any of one of them would warrant an overwhelming vote in favor of the bill. But Mr. Speaker, what makes this legislation truly extraordinary is the inclusion of Section 4, which establishes a "Visual Impairment and Orientation and Mobility Professionals Education Assistance Program." This legislation will close a large gap in the Nation's commitment to blind and low-vision veterans by establishing a scholarship program for students seeking training in blind rehabilitation.

I am proud and honored, Mr. Speaker, that the basis for this new program for our blind and low-vision veterans is the legislation I introduced earlier this Congress, H.R. 1240, the "Vision Impairment Specialist Training Act," or VISTA Act of 2007. I am proud that my legislation was strongly supported by the chairman of the Veterans Affairs Committee, Mr. FILNER; Mr. MICHAUD, the chair of this Committee's Subcommittee on Health; the co-chairs of the Congressional Vision Caucus, my colleague Mr. GENE GREEN of Texas and Ms. ROSLEHTINEN of Florida. This legislation is also strongly supported by the Blind Veterans of America, an organization chartered by Congress in 1958, which has been for nearly 50

years the only veterans service organization exclusively dedicated to serving America's blind and visually impaired veterans. Companion legislation, S.1672, "The VA Vision Scholars Act of 2007," has already been introduced in the other body by Senators HAGEL, OBAMA, and BROWN.

Mr. Speaker, let me explain briefly why it is so important that we establish here and now an educational assistance program for persons pursuing training in blind rehabilitation.

There are approximately 160,000 legally blind veterans in the United States, but only 35,000 are currently enrolled in Veterans Health Administration services.

In addition, it is estimated that there are over 1 million low-vision veterans in the United States, and incidences of blindness among the total veteran population of 26 million are expected to increase by about 40 percent over the next few years. This is because the most prevalent causes of legal blindness and low vision are age-related, and the average age of the veteran population is increasing; the current average age is about 80 years old.

Members of the armed forces are important to our Nation and we show them our appreciation by taking care of them even after they have completed their service. But the fact is that there are not enough blind rehabilitation specialists to serve all legally blind and low-vision veterans in the United States.

Blind rehabilitation training helps give these veterans awareness of and functioning in their surroundings and enables them to retain their independence and dignity. Veterans without these services may find it difficult to be self-sufficient, relying on others to perform certain skills or even simple tasks on their behalf.

Mr. Speaker, Public Law 104-262, the Eligibility Reform Act 1996, requires the Department of Veterans Affairs to maintain its capacity to provide specialized rehabilitative services to disabled veterans, but it cannot do so when there are not enough specialists to address these needs.

Last December, the Veterans Programs Extension Act was passed, which included a provision by Congressman MICHAEL MICHAUD to increase the number of Blind Rehabilitation Outpatient Specialists serving our Nation's veterans. However, there are currently not enough counselors certified in blind rehabilitation to provide for the growing number of blind or low-vision veterans, let alone the rest of our Nation's elderly population.

Section 4 of the legislation before us helps to remedy this situation by directing the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to establish a scholarship program for students seeking a degree or certificate in blind rehabilitation (Vision Impairment and/or Orientation and Mobility). The availability of these scholarship opportunities will provide an incentive to students considering entry into the field.

Additionally, in exchange for the scholarship award, students are required to work for 3 years in a healthcare facility of the Department of Veterans Affairs, to ensure that our veterans are well cared for.

If I might, let me discuss this vital legislation in more detail. The legislation mandates that the Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall provide financial assistance to students enrolled in a program of study leading to a degree or certificate in Visual Impairment and/or Orientation and Mobility at an accredited educational institution in a U.S. state or territory, provided that they agree with applicable requirements.

As I stated earlier, the purpose of the scholarship program is to increase the supply of qualified blind rehabilitation specialists for the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Nation.

The legislation requires that the Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall widely publicize this scholarship program to colleges and universities across the Nation, especially institutions with large numbers of Hispanic students and HBCUs. This is a particularly salutary provision because African Americans, Hispanics, and other minorities are underrepresented in the field of vision rehabilitation.

To apply and participate in the scholarship program, an applicant shall submit to the Secretary, or his designee, an application and agree to serve a 3-year period of obligated service in the Department of Veterans Affairs. The legislation requires that the Secretary shall include among the application and agreement materials a fair summary of the rights and liabilities of the applicant if accepted into the program.

When the Secretary approves of the applicant's acceptance, the applicant shall be promptly notified and accepted into the program.

The amount of financial assistance provided for an applicant shall be the amount determined by the Secretary as being necessary to pay the tuition and fees of the applicant. If the applicant is enrolled in a dual degree or certification program, the amount awarded shall not exceed the amounts necessary for the minimum number of credit hours to achieve such dual certification or degree.

Financial assistance provided to an applicant by this scholarship program may supplement other educational assistance, as long as the total award does not exceed the tuition and fees required for an academic year.

The maximum award for any full-time student per academic year may not exceed \$15,000. The maximum award for any part-time student should be determined in proportion to the amount that would be the case if the student were full-time. For any student, the total amount of assistance may not exceed \$45,000.

The maximum duration for financial assistance under this program is 6 years.

The agreement for participation in this scholarship program shall be signed by both the Secretary and the participant. The Secretary shall agree to provide the participant with the authorized financial assistance and the participant shall agree to: accept the assistance; maintain enrollment and attendance in the appropriate program of study; maintain an acceptable level of academic standing; serve as a full-time employee in the Department of Veterans Affairs for 3 years within the first 6 years after completing the program and receiving the degree or certificate specified.

If the applicant fails to satisfy the requirements of the agreement, the applicant must repay the amount equal to the unearned portion of assistance, except in circumstances authorized by the Secretary. The Secretary shall establish procedures for determining the amount of the repayment required, as well as the circumstances under which an exception to the required repayment may be granted.

The Secretary shall prescribe regulations for the waiver or suspension of an applicant's obligation for service or payment whenever the

applicant's noncompliance is due to circumstances beyond his or her control or it is in the best interest of the United States.

Mr. Speaker, I should point out that an obligation to repay the Secretary under this section is a debt owed the United States. Thus, a discharge in bankruptcy does not discharge a person from a debt under this legislation if the discharge order is entered less than 5 years after the date of the termination of the agreement or contract.

Mr. Speaker, every morning when I arrive at my office, I am reminded of how fortunate I am to live in a Nation as great as the United States. Outside of my office there is a poster-board with the names and faces of those heroes from Houston, Texas, who have lost their lives wearing the uniform of our country. We live in a Nation where so many brave young men and women volunteer to the ultimate sacrifice so that their countrymen can enjoy the blessings of liberty. Now is the time to let our heroes know they have not been, and will never be, forgotten. They deserve honor, they deserve dignity, and they deserve the best care. After all, this is the least we can do for those who have done so much for all of us.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, let me also thank the Staff of the Veterans Affairs Committee and the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity for their hard work. I also wish to pay special tribute to several members of my staff without whose valuable contributions this significant legislative achievement would not have been possible: Maggie Mitchell, Shelle Gordon, Mona Floyd, Yohannes Tsehail, and Gregory Berry.

Mr. Speaker, nothing brings greater honor to this body and the persons we are proud to represent than keeping faith with the men and women who have worn the uniform in service to our country. H.R. 1315 keeps and extends our commitment to those who have risked their lives to defend our country. I urge all members to support this legislation.

Mr. BOOZMAN. Mr. Speaker, if the gentleman has no further speakers, in closing, I can't tell you how privileged I am in serving on the Economic Opportunity Subcommittee. We are charged with putting veterans to work and providing educational benefits. As the son of an old master sergeant in the Air Force who did 20 years and retired, I understand the importance of this.

This bill is an excellent bill. I want to thank the chairman for his hard work and also thank the ranking member, Mr. BUYER, for his hard work. I thank Chairwoman HERSETH SANDLIN, and again our staffs who do so much work.

This bill is an excellent product of bipartisan work on behalf of veterans, and I urge all of my colleagues to support the legislation.

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

Mr. FILNER. Mr. Speaker, I need to yield 1 further minute to the gentlewoman from Texas (Ms. JACKSON-LEE) for some thank-you words.

Ms. JACKSON-LEE of Texas. Mr. Speaker, I want to add the staff director of the full committee to the list of appreciation I would like to offer, along with Maggie Mitchell, Shelle

Gordon, Mona Floyd, Yohannes Tsehail, Greg Berry, and all of the Veterans' Affairs Committee.

Also, let me acknowledge, I think there was a deletion of section 5, and I want to correct that for the record.

Mr. FILNER. Mr. Speaker, I just wanted to conclude by referring to the section that the gentlewoman from Texas (Ms. JACKSON-LEE) referred to.

Unfortunately, because of scoring rules, we had to remove at the last minute a section that would have given protection from foreclosure, extend the protection from foreclosure on homes from 3 months to 6 months for those who are fighting abroad, whether in the active duty or in the Guard and Reserve units.

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It's a very important section, very important protection I think that we have to extend to our men and women in active duty. We will take that up at a later time and try to make sure that that protection is granted.

Mr. WALZ of Minnesota. Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of H.R. 1315. I applaud my colleague, Congresswoman HERSETH SANDLIN, for her tireless work as Chair of the Economic Opportunity Subcommittee of the Veterans' Affairs Committee. She has put together an impressive package of benefits in this bill and as a veteran myself, I have to say I am incredibly proud to serve with the Congresswoman and am grateful for her unwavering support of veterans.

I am also proud that this bill includes the language from H.R. 1632, the Improving Veterans' Reemployment Act. Congressman DAVE REICHERT and I introduced this legislation to enact a small, technical fix that will improve the way the Federal Government deals with National Guard and Reserve reemployment complaints.

This legislation acts on the GAO's recommendations by requiring the federal agencies and departments that are involved with veterans' reemployment complaints to fully share their data. The bill also mandates that Congress receive all of this data in an aggregate report. This legislation offers a simple fix to a problem that has a negative effect on thousands of veterans returning home to their civilian jobs.

As a retired Command Sergeant Major in the Army National Guard, I have an intimate understanding of the veterans' reemployment issue. I deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom from 2003 to 2004 and was fortunate to have my job as a high school teacher waiting for me when I returned home. Unfortunately, the process was not as simple for every member of my unit and I have heard plenty of horror stories from both Guard members and Reservists who came home to a radically different job situation. Local businesses back home in Minnesota have done a tremendous job supporting the Guard and Reserves and bearing the financial burden of long deployments, but service members can still face problems when they return. Our bill goes a long way to improving the way the Federal Government deals with reemployment problems.

I urge my colleagues to support our legislation and the larger bill, H.R. 1315. Aside from

the provisions of the legislation Congressman REICHERT and I authored, the Improving Veterans' Reemployment Act, H.R. 1315 includes many important provisions that improve benefits for veterans nationwide.

Mr. FILNER. Mr. Speaker, I urge support of H.R. 1315, as amended, and 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. 1315, as amended.

The question was taken; and (two-thirds being in the affirmative) the rules were suspended and the bill, as amended, was passed.

The title was amended so as to read: "A Bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to make certain improvements in the benefits provided to veterans under laws administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes."

A motion to reconsider was laid on the table.

VETERANS' HEALTH CARE IMPROVEMENT ACT OF 2007

Mr. FILNER. Mr. Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and pass the bill (H.R. 2874) to amend title 38, United States Code, to make certain improvements in the provision of health care to veterans, and for other purposes, as amended.

The Clerk read the title of the bill.

The text of the bill is as follows:

H.R. 2874

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

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE; TABLE OF CONTENTS.

(a) SHORT TITLE.—This Act may be cited as the "Veterans' Health Care Improvement Act of 2007".

(b) TABLE OF CONTENTS.—The table of contents for this Act is as follows:

- Sec. 1. Short title; table of contents.
- Sec. 2. Grants for support of therapeutic readjustment programs for veterans.
- Sec. 3. Transportation grants for rural veterans service organizations.
- Sec. 4. Permanent treatment authority for participants in Department of Defense chemical and biological testing conducted by Deseret Test Center (including Project Shipboard Hazard and Defense).
- Sec. 5. Extension of expiring collections authorities.
- Sec. 6. Readjustment and mental health services for Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom Veterans.
- Sec. 7. Expansion and extension of authority for program of referral and counseling services for at-risk veterans transitioning from certain institutions.
- Sec. 8. Permanent authority for domiciliary services for homeless veterans and enhancement of capacity of domiciliary care programs for female veterans.
- Sec. 9. Financial assistance for supportive services for very low-income veteran families in permanent housing.