

traveled to Tehran. I recently met with one of the Arab nation's Foreign Ministers, and he told me that the hotel rooms in Tehran are filled with business men and women looking to line up to do business with Tehran.

This is a real issue that the sanctions regime is starting to unravel, and the legislation we have pending with 59 cosponsors is an insurance policy to say: If you are not serious about this agreement, we will impose further sanctions to make sure we do everything we can to stop you from having nuclear weapons capability.

This is a critical moment in the history of this country. This is a critical moment for the safety of the world. We want to stop Iran from using diplomatic means as a way to have nuclear weapons capability because of the risk it presents to the world.

We cannot be naive. We have to understand the prior behavior of Iran because the prior behavior of Iran will allow us to go in with our eyes wide open rather than just taking their assurances that they are serious about a nuclear weapons agreement that will stop them from having this capability.

As we stand on the floor, I ask the majority leader to allow a vote on this legislation so we can send a clear message to Iran and the rest of the world that they should not think they should do further business with Iran unless Iran is serious about giving up its nuclear weapons program through a transparent, verifiable agreement that will ensure they cannot threaten the State of Israel and the rest of the world with a nuclear weapon. I ask the majority leader to allow a vote on this important legislation.

There are so few pieces of legislation that come through the Senate which actually have 59 cosponsors. This is one of them. It certainly has strong bipartisan support.

I don't buy the argument that if we were to pass this legislation, somehow Iran would walk away from the negotiations. If Iran walks away from the negotiations because we pass prospective legislation as an insurance policy to make sure they are serious about a real, verifiable agreement that stops their nuclear weapons program, then, frankly, we know they have been playing us. Because the reality is, if they are serious, they should not care if we put an insurance policy out there. If they are serious, they will follow through and will do what the interim agreement requires and will agree to a final agreement that stops their nuclear weapons program in a transparent, verifiable way once and for all.

On the other hand, if they are just going to walk away with a threat of prospective sanctions, how serious can they be? We will still have the sanctions in place that will continue to put pressure on them to say the United States of America and our allies will not accept a nuclear-armed Iran because of the threat it presents to us.

We cannot allow the largest state sponsor—and most serious state spon-

sor—of terrorism around the world to have this capability. We cannot allow a race in the Middle East—a Sunni-Shia race—to see who can have a nuclear weapon first because of the danger it presents to the world.

Finally, we cannot allow Iran to continue to threaten our friend and ally, the State of Israel. I understand and appreciate that when Iran and its leaders have made statements they want to annihilate Israel from the face of the Earth, our friends in Israel take that very seriously. They have vowed never again. We stand with them not only for their friendship but also for the safety of the world.

We have legislation pending on the floor that gives us an opportunity to make it clear what the United States of America stands for and that we will not accept a nuclear-armed Iran. They must be serious or there will be consequences in terms of economic sanctions.

I thank the Presiding Officer.

I yield the floor and note the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

HEALTH CARE

Mr. MURPHY. Madam President, yesterday we received news that 4 million people have now signed up in private health care exchanges all across the country. In addition, it was released that about 12 million people have called the call centers in January alone, and 1.1 million people signed up to receive health care through the Affordable Care Act during that time. Young enrollment—the group of individuals for which there has always been a question as to whether they are going to sign up for these exchanges—grew by 65 percent.

It is time for this body to recognize the Affordable Care Act is working. It is working for people who have been desperate to get insurance. It is working for people who have been getting the short end of the stick from insurance companies, and it is working for millions of seniors all across this country who have been paying far too much for prescription drug costs and for preventive health care.

We have known this from the very beginning in Connecticut. Despite the hiccups over enrollment in the fall period, States such as Connecticut that had made a commitment to making this law work, rather than undermining it, have seen the success from day one. Connecticut, at the outset, said that we were going to try to enroll between October 1 and March 31 about 80,000 people. That was our goal. We just announced in Connecticut—a

State that is working to implement the law, not undermine the law—that we didn't just hit 80,000, we didn't just hit 100,000, but we have enrolled 126,000 Connecticut residents in our health care exchanges and in Medicaid. Our projection is that we are going to enroll 150,000 people by March 31. That is nearly double our initial estimate. Last week, traffic on Connecticut's Web site rose 31 percent, and the daily enrollments rose by 67 percent.

The stories just keep on coming into our office about the lives that are being changed as people, for the first time in their lives, get access to affordable health care. People such as Susie Clayton, who has been dealing with a cancer diagnosis for over a decade—a crippling, preexisting condition that for most of her adult life has kept her out of the ranks of the insured. I have known Susie for probably two decades. Almost every single conversation I have had with Susie over those 20 years has been about her daily struggle to try to deal with her illness and her preexisting condition. Every single day, every single week, she has thought about whether she is going to be able to pay for her health care if she has a reoccurrence of her cancer and whether during that time she is going to have a job that provides her with insurance.

Susie had been paying about \$1,700 a month at last count for an insurance plan she could afford. Her life changed on January 1. She now is paying a couple hundred dollars a month in premiums. She finally gets to wake up every day not having to worry about whether she is going to be able to afford coverage, whether she is going to be able to see a doctor to deal with her very difficult diagnosis. With 4 million people now enrolled in these exchanges across the country, that story can be replicated over and over.

A bunch of our Republican colleagues have come to the floor over the last couple of days—I was in the presiding chair yesterday listening to some speeches—regarding some new information about Medicare Advantage. Everybody knows by now that included in the health care bill was an end to the subsidies given to Medicare Advantage plans. The private sector in health care and in other industries always tells us they can do things more cheaply than the Federal Government—and a lot of times they are right about that—but it was exactly the opposite when it came to Medicare Advantage. We were paying private insurance companies 13 percent more than it costs the Federal Government to run Medicare. This was a source of enormous profit for the insurance companies. It didn't make sense to oversubsidize insurance companies to run a program the Federal Government itself was running for 13 percent less money. So we ended those subsidies, and part of the elimination of those subsidies has gone into effect.

But the story that is being told on the floor today isn't true. The fact is that since the Affordable Care Act was

passed, even as we have been implementing these cuts to these overly generous, unjustifiable subsidies to insurance companies, Medicare Advantage enrollment has gone up by 30 percent. Thirty percent more seniors are now enrolled in Medicare Advantage, even as these cuts have been imposed. Premiums are down. Medicare Advantage premiums have been reduced by 10 percent.

Over the course of the debate on the Medicare Advantage cuts, I heard Republican after Republican, when I was in the House of Representatives, come to the floor and tell us that the sky was going to fall when we ended these subsidies to insurance companies. I will be honest. A lot of them are in my State of Connecticut. Not only has the sky not fallen, it has risen, with 30 percent more seniors in Medicare Advantage with 10 percent less in premiums. To the argument I have heard on this floor that there will be less choices available to seniors because of these cuts going into effect, let's just be honest: The average Medicare beneficiary has 18 different Medicare Advantage plans to choose from—18 different plans. That is a pretty robust market.

Let me just add that Republicans have voted for these cuts themselves. The Ryan budget, which has essentially been the budget standard for Republicans in both the House and in the Senate—endorsed by hundreds of Republican legislators—the Paul Ryan budget included the cuts to Medicare Advantage subsidies because Republicans have agreed with Democrats that there is no reason to subsidize insurance companies instead of subsidizing beneficiaries.

So what happened when we decided to stop subsidizing Medicare Advantage? Enrollment went up 30 percent. Premiums went down 10 percent. The average beneficiary still had the choice of 18 different plans. But we took that money we saved in padding the pockets of health care insurance companies, and we told seniors that when they show up to get a preventive health care visit, they are not going to have to pay anything out-of-pocket. So since the ACA has been passed, here is how much a senior has to pay for their annual checkup: Nothing. So 25 million people have gotten free preventive care since the Affordable Care Act has been passed.

What else did we do? We decided that this doughnut hole in the prescription drug bill, whereby people got coverage up front and then they had to pay for a certain amount of drugs themselves and then they got catastrophic coverage, didn't make sense. So we eliminated the prescription drug doughnut hole. It will be gone by 2020. It has been cut by more than half already. Since the implementation of the Affordable Care Act, the average senior has saved \$1,200 in prescription drug costs thanks to the Affordable Care Act.

So as I listen to my Republican colleagues come to the floor and complain

about the cuts to Medicare Advantage—cuts, in fact, that many of them have supported—I think we have to ask ourselves: If we had a choice to provide a 13-percent subsidy to for-profit insurance companies or pass along \$1,200 in savings to American seniors and eliminate the costs that many of these fixed-income seniors pay when they go in to get preventive care, what would we choose? This is really all about choices in this body. It is about choices in terms of where we put the money we spend on behalf of Medicare beneficiaries. To me, it is a no-brainer. To the American public, it is a no-brainer. Instead of subsidizing insurance companies, let's subsidize hard-working seniors, who have built this country, with \$1,200 in drug savings and 25 million people who have gotten free preventive health care.

For Republicans who have come down to the floor and said they want to repeal the Affordable Care Act or that they want to repeal the cuts to Medicare Advantage plans, essentially they are saying they want to return billions of dollars to the insurance companies and take away that money from seniors in this country. I do not think that is a choice the American people are going to accept.

This week a group of us in the Senate are launching the ACAworks campaign. Later today I will be joined by a number of my colleagues around the corner as we launch a new effort to make clear to the American people that now, with 4 million people enrolled, and millions of people saving money—notwithstanding the legitimate difficulties that were encountered in the first days of the Web site—the Affordable Care Act is working. It is working for millions and millions of people across this country who are finally getting care.

We will be joined today, as well, by a couple of Medicare recipients who are glad they now have the protection when they get into the doughnut hole. They are glad they now get free preventive care. And they will take the choice any day of this Congress and this government investing in them instead of investing in big for-profit insurance companies.

None of us deny there are bumps in the road as you rework one-sixth of the American economy, which represents our health care economy. None of us will deny there is no excuse for the fact that for the first few months there were a lot of people who were not able to enroll who wanted to. But now that the enrollment site is working, now that outreach efforts are up and running, record numbers of people are signing up for health care because there is an almost insatiable demand for quality, affordable health care that is now being met as the Affordable Care Act is working.

I yield back the floor and suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Madam President, I want to begin by thanking my colleague and friend from Connecticut, Senator MURPHY, for the very eloquent and powerful remarks he has just made, showing America the Connecticut experience with health care, which shows that the Affordable Care Act is working and is expanding opportunities for health care across the country. Once the myths are exploded, once the truth is told, Americans will appreciate how fortunate we are to have this reform in the way that health care is insured and delivered for the American people.

There are bumps in the road, as Senator MURPHY has just said. There will continue to be issues to be overcome in achieving success. But the enormous potential to make America healthier, to eliminate the anxiety and anguish Americans experience in seeking a quality of life that health care affords, is an opportunity and obligation we cannot shirk. I am proud to join with him in speaking this truth and clarifying for people across the country the great promise of this program.

A lot of the promise still has to be fulfilled. A lot of the realization about that promise has to be educated. But we will succeed in that effort. I thank him and my other colleagues who are joining us in seeking to make America realize the great potential and promise that we have, and already the great accomplishments that have been made.

Connecticut stands as a model for both the promise and the accomplishment in the 130,000 people who have already enrolled in the benefits for young people now permitted to stay on their parents' policies, and, indeed, the elimination of preexisting conditions as an obstacle to insurance.

I know about many of these issues and obstacles from my time as attorney general when I fought insurance companies that denied basic opportunities and failed to fulfill their obligation and impose these kinds of obstacles. Now, hopefully, insurers will be a partner in this effort, and so will the medical community and business community across the country.

So I look forward to continuing this effort and thank him for the exposition he has given, and my other colleagues who will join us later today.

I want to focus on a group that particularly needs health care in this country, and that is our veterans. We are here to talk about the Comprehensive Veterans Health and Benefits and Military Retirement Pay Restoration Act of 2014—a measure that seeks to address comprehensively the challenges our veterans face today.

There are more and more veterans. We are losing some of the "greatest generation." In fact, we are losing them tragically and unfortunately

every day. But the next greatest generation needs the same benefits and services we have given to the “greatest generation.” The next greatest generation is serving right now and has served recently in the wars of Iraq and Afghanistan.

We must be unwavering in our commitment to our veterans. We must determine that this big and broad bill is necessary to keep faith with them and to make sure we meet the diverse and urgent needs they present.

We all talk in this body about our commitment to veterans. But all too often, our Nation has failed to keep faith. I have learned that we all have expressed here our admiration and commitment to our Nation’s veterans. I have introduced, as have many of my colleagues, veterans bills based on input from my constituents. In fact, my very first piece of legislation as a Senator was the Honoring All Veterans Act.

But the reality is this comprehensive approach is necessary. I thank Senator SANDERS as chairman of the Veterans’ Affairs Committee for recognizing that the needs of our veterans are interlocking, multifaceted, and manifold in the kinds of problems that are raised as they leave the military and enter the civilian world.

Sometimes it is their medical records that cannot be transferred seamlessly from the Department of Defense to Veterans Affairs and Veterans’ Administration facilities. Sometimes it is the failure to make their military skills transferable in credentials and licensing. And sometimes it is medical conditions, health care needs for post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury, that make their wounds invisible, make them difficult to discern to the ordinary eye but are there deeply and enduringly unless they are treated properly. That is why health care for them is so important and why this bill expands opportunity for health care so dramatically.

The health care needs of our veterans must be met through the provisions of this bill that expand health care opportunities and services. When I first came to the Senate, I thought—and I think reasonably—that a veteran needing health care could simply go to a VA hospital to receive it. But that is really not the case. On January 17, 2003, the Department of Veterans Affairs announced that it would “temporarily” suspend enrolling Priority Group 8 veterans. That temporary restriction stands today. So under existing restrictions, a veteran making as little as \$33,577 or a family of five making a household income of \$50,025 can be denied health benefits in Connecticut. There are an estimated 720,000 Priority Group 8 veterans who are not enrolled in health care. Tens of thousands of veterans apply each year for enrollment and are denied due to that means test.

Simply put, the VA should have the capacity and resources to serve every

veteran. That is why section 301 of this bill would allow veterans who lack that access, who do not have a service-connected disability, and who do not have affordable health insurance, to enroll in the VA’s health care system.

There are other health care provisions: section 305, which expands the provision of chiropractic care; sections 331, 332, and 333, which expand complementary and alternative medicine. Anybody who has not yet seen “Escape Fire” should view it to understand the stark ways that veterans have challenges in access to alternative treatments and why drug addiction and abuse can become such a problem. And there is section 334, expanding wellness programs. All of these programs are vital, as well as the expanded access to treatment for post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury, which, in my view, are at the core of the need for this legislation.

Section 342 would require the VA to contract with outside providers to establish a program of supportive services to family members and caregivers of veterans suffering from mental illness. All of these invisible conditions have such dramatic consequences in the employability of veterans and their ability to give back and continue to contribute to this Nation, as so many of them wish to do.

The needs of our veterans are also pressing in disability claims. The need to end the backlog is, again, one of the areas addressed directly in this bill. The backlog of disability claims at the Department of Veterans Affairs has become a chronic problem. The VA is making progress. There is no question that the numbers are better today than they were. But there are still veterans such as Army veteran Jordan Massa in Connecticut, who served in Afghanistan, and Marine veteran David Alexander, who was deployed in Iraq, who had to wait too long and suffered as a result. We need to keep faith with those veterans.

I understand and I applaud Secretary Shinseki, who has committed to tackling this problem. But some 389,000 claims are still backlogged. In Connecticut, about 48 percent of the claims are backlogged, meaning that 48 percent of claims made by our veterans take more than 125 days to be resolved. Each of these veterans has an individual story, a record of service, a record of suffering. Be it in today’s wars or conflicts past, a record of service and sacrifice is exemplified by every one of them. These individuals may now be looking for employment, perhaps, to support a family. We need to keep faith with them.

This legislation aims to decrease the backlog further through an accelerated appeals process and getting the VA the information it needs to decide these claims. It brings in local governments to help with the claims. And it helps veterans who have misfiled documents in the claims process to seek a better route to what they need and deserve.

The bill also would require regular reports to Congress on efforts to eliminate the backlog. Accountability is so critical—accountability on backlogs, on all of the issues that underlie the failure to process these claims as quickly as they should be. And the backlog must be eliminated.

Employment programs are also addressed in this bill. So are the traumatic effects of sexual assault. The bill is multifaceted and comprehensive, as it should be. To address the diverse and urgent needs, it must be big and broad because the needs and challenges of our veterans are big and broad.

The reality is that 1 million men and women will leave the military over the next 5 years. One million patriotic and brave men and women will be separating from our Armed Forces. Becoming veterans, they will need services and benefits that they have earned, and they will need them at the time they leave, not at some distant point in the future. We owe it to them now to keep faith.

I have submitted amendments that would address some of the other issues.

For example, the need to recognize that post-traumatic stress is not only a condition that afflicts our current military men and women and veterans but also past veterans, even though it was undiagnosed and untreated at the time. Changing their status so as to recognize post-traumatic stress for the veterans of past wars is a need that we need to address.

I will make sure those veterans of past wars, whether it is Vietnam or Korea or any of those conflicts in our history, receive a second look at their discharge. That is the purpose of the amendment. That is the purpose of legal action that has been brought by the Yale veterans clinic. I will continue to support it.

We can go further as well to enhance our veterans’ health by including the Toxic Exposure Research and Military Family Support Act in this measure. I have an amendment that will do so. Many veterans were exposed to toxic chemicals such as Agent Orange and their needs are only beginning to be addressed.

In addition to the harmful effects to those individuals, there are also impacts on their children. For many years those who were exposed to Agent Orange were told there was no evidence that their symptoms resulted from that. Now that we have evidence Agent Orange is toxic, we need to include the longer term effects on their children and their families. The amendment I have offered would address those issues.

Even if none of those amendments I have proposed are adopted during this process, this measure stands on its own as a historic step forward. It is, indeed, a historic recognition of the obligation and opportunity we have at this point in our history to make sure we leave no veterans behind and keep faith with our veterans, address their needs in a

big and broad bill that reflects the urgent and diverse issues and challenges they face. I am proud to support it.

I thank my colleagues on the Veterans' Affairs Committee who have approved many of the parts of this bill by unanimous vote or overwhelming bipartisan majorities. This cause should be truly bipartisan. Let's move forward and move America forward addressing the needs and challenges of its veterans as we have an obligation to do. We must keep faith with our veterans and leave no veterans behind.

I yield the floor and suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. COONS). Without objection, it is so ordered.

CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Morning business is closed.

COMPREHENSIVE VETERANS HEALTH AND BENEFITS AND MILITARY RETIREMENT PAY RESTORATION ACT OF 2014—MOTION TO PROCEED

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will resume consideration of the motion to proceed to S. 1982 which the clerk will now report.

The bill clerk read as follows:

Motion to Proceed to Calendar No. 301 (S. 1982) a bill to improve the provision of medical services and benefits to veterans, and for other purposes.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Vermont.

Mr. SANDERS. Mr. President, let me thank Senators MURRAY, DURBIN, and BLUMENTHAL for their very thoughtful and important remarks regarding the needs of veterans and why it is absolutely imperative we pass this comprehensive veterans legislation. Let me also begin by thanking all of the members of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs for their very hard work in helping to craft what is not only an enormously important piece of legislation impacting the lives of millions of our veterans but is also, to a large degree, a bipartisan piece of legislation.

It is no secret that Congress today is extraordinarily partisan and, in fact, is largely dysfunctional. On major issue after major issue the American people are crying out to us and asking that we address the serious problems facing this country. Yet we are unable to do virtually anything. I hope—and I say this from the bottom of my heart, and as chairman of the Senate veterans committee—that at least on the issue of addressing their needs—the need to

protect and defend those veterans who have protected and defended us, those men and women who have put their lives on the line to protect this country—we can rise above the partisan rancor that we see down here on the floor every single day.

That is what the American people want us to do. Not only has the veterans community been clear on the need to pass this bill, but that is what the American people want us to do. They understand the sacrifices made by veterans and their families, and they want us to rise above the partisan acrimony the American people see every single day.

Let me be very clear, and let there be no misunderstanding about this. I have tried, as chairman of the committee, to do everything I can to bring forth legislation which includes provisions from Republicans and provisions from Democrats. My view is, and has been, that if there is a good idea that improves the lives of veterans—I don't care if there is an "R" attached to a Senator's name, a "D" or an "I," as in my case—let's bring forth that legislation.

The reality is, to the best of my knowledge, there are 26 separate provisions that Republican Members have authored or cosponsored—that is a lot—and some of them are very significant provisions. Further, perhaps most importantly, two of the most important parts of this comprehensive legislation are omnibus bills that were passed unanimously by the committee. So what we have done is brought ideas together in two of the most important provisions in this bill, with two separate omnibus bills passed unanimously by the committee. There are other provisions in the bill that were not passed unanimously but also passed with bipartisan support.

I also want to point out the two provisions that were not discussed at the committee level but have been passed almost unanimously by the Republican-controlled House of Representatives, and I believe have strong bipartisan support in the Senate. With almost unanimous votes, the House passed a provision that would solve a long-standing problem and enable the VA to enter into 27 major medical facility leases in 18 States and Puerto Rico. We have virtually that same language in our bill, and that was passed almost unanimously in the House. So I think that is a nonpartisan, bipartisan provision.

A second provision passed by the House with very broad support deals with ensuring that veterans can take full advantage of the post 9/11 GI bill and get in-State tuition in the State in which they currently live. That language I believe is identical in our bill.

So we have major provisions passed in the Republican House with almost unanimous support that are in this bill, and there are two omnibus provisions passed with unanimous support out of our committee, and we have other provisions passed with bipartisan support.

So while I am not here to say this is 100-percent bipartisan, because it is not, we have gone a very long way to do what has not been done very often here in the Senate, and that is to bring everybody's ideas together to pass something that is terribly important for our veterans.

The point I am trying to make here is that I happen to believe that virtually every Member of the Senate, regardless of their political point of view, does care about veterans. I say this especially about the members of the committee—the Veterans' Affairs Committee—who would not be on the committee if they didn't care about veterans. I believe that virtually every Member of the Senate wants to do the best they can for veterans. That is why I have worked so hard to do my best to make sure this bill is as bipartisan as it can be.

In my view, this is, in fact, a very good bill. But like any other piece of legislation, it can be made better. We have 50 States, we have Native American tribes, and we have all kinds of issues out there. There are 100 Senators here in this body who know their States, who know their issues. So let me be very clear in echoing what the majority leader said this morning, and that is he and I want to encourage every Member of the Senate—Democrat, Republican, and Independent—who has germane amendments dealing with veterans issues to please offer those amendments. Bring them to the floor.

My understanding is a number of amendments have already been offered by Democratic Senators and we have some amendments now that have been offered by Republican Senators. I understand Senator RUBIO and Senator COLLINS have offered amendments, as well as a number of Democrats. We look forward to more amendments coming to the floor so that we can have a serious discussion about those amendments.

I hope the one thing that will not happen is that, as we discuss this legislation, instead of having an honest debate about the needs of veterans, that this legislation becomes another forum for the same old partisan politics we have seen for years—the sort of partisan politics the American people are increasingly disgusted with. The American people understand that honest people have differences of opinion on the issues, but they do not want to see serious legislation being sabotaged because of political partisanship.

In my view, with regard to this veterans bill and the fact we have language in this bill which can improve the lives of millions of veterans and their families, I believe it would be extremely disrespectful to the men and women who have put their lives on the line to defend this country to use this piece of legislation dealing with veterans issues as nothing more than a political pawn for other issues that are totally extraneous to their needs.