

President Signs Caregivers Bill

Week of May 17, 2010

President Barack Obama recently signed S. 1963 (The Caregiver's Bill) into law. The new law creates support program for veteran caregivers that will provide training, financial assistance, and improved respite service. The new law also improves health care services for America's women veterans, expands the mental health services provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs, and expands supportive services for homeless veterans. Details of the new law can be found in the U.S. House of Representatives Speaker's [bill summary](#)

On April 21st, the House passed amendments to the [Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act \(S. 1963\)](#) by a vote of [419-0](#), and [President Obama signed the bill into law on May 5th](#). The bill:

- provides support to family and others who care for disabled, ill, or injured veterans
- enhances health services for the 1.8 million women veterans, including care for newborns for the 1st time in history
- expands mental health services for veterans and health care access for veteran in rural areas
- prohibit co-payments for veterans who are catastrophically disabled

To help meet the many hardships and sacrifices associated with lengthy recovery and rehabilitation from severe injuries of veterans, the bill would provide support services to family and other caregivers of veterans, including education on how to be a better caregiver, counseling and mental health services, and respite care for family and other caregivers of all veterans. It also provides health care and a stipend for caregivers living with severely wounded veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan.

This support is vital for the wounded veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan and their families, as about 20 percent of active duty, 15 percent of reserve and 25 percent of retired and separated members have a family member or friend who has been forced to leave a job to care for the veteran full-time, according to the Dole/Shalala report.

The bill also expands and improves VA health care services for the women who have bravely served their country, working to remove existing barriers to women veterans seeking health care, providing up to seven days of care of newborn children of women veterans for the first time in history, and enhancing treatment for sexual trauma for women at the VA.

Touting it as "landmark" legislation that "offers bold solutions to major challenges facing service members, veterans, and their families," the bill is supported by the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans, AMVETS, Paralyzed Veterans of America, Wounded Warrior Project and the National Military Family Association.

This landmark measure builds on the significant accomplishments for veterans, troops, and military families over the last three years under the New Direction Congress – including the New GI Bill, the building of more military child care centers and better military family housing, and historic investments to strengthen quality veterans' health care.

[Learn more»](#)

The Senate passed its version of the bill on November 19, by a vote of 98-0 after Sen. Tom Coburn held it up. The House passed the [Caregiver Assistance and Resource Enhancement Act \(HR 3155\)](#) by voice vote on July 27 and [Women Veterans Health Care Improvement Act \(HR 1211\)](#) by a vote of 408-0 on June 23.

More on the provisions in the legislation:

Caregiver Assistance

Caregivers of OEF/OIF Veterans

- Caregivers are defined as family members (parent, spouse, child, step-family member, extended family member) or non-family members who live with the veteran.
- The caregiver and eligible OEF/OIF veteran must submit a joint application and once accepted, the caregiver receives the following support services:
 - Training and education;
 - Counseling and mental health services;
 - Respite care of no less than 30 days annually, including 24 hour in-home respite care;
 - Lodging and subsistence payments when accompanying the veteran on medical care visits;
 - Health care through the CHAMPVA program (Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs); and
 - Monthly financial stipend as determined appropriate by the Secretary based on the amount and degree of personal care services provided, and no less than the monthly amount of a commercial home health care entity.

Caregivers of Veterans of Any Era

- Caregivers are defined in the same manner as that of the support program for caregiver of OEF/OIF veterans. However, there is no residency requirement for non-family members.
- Support services for caregivers of veterans of any era include the following:
 - Training and education;
 - Counseling and mental health services;
 - Respite care including 24 hours in-home respite care;
 - Information on the support services available to caregivers through other public, private, and non-profit agencies.

WOMEN VETERANS HEALTH CARE

The bill will expand and improve VA health care services for the 1.8 million women who have bravely served their country. It requires the VA to:

- Conduct a study of barriers to women veterans seeking health care,
- Educate and train mental health professionals caring for veterans with sexual trauma;
- Implement a reintegration and readjustment pilot program;
- Establish a child care pilot program for women receiving regular and intensive mental health care and intensive health care services, or who are in need of such services but do not seek care due to the lack of child care services;
- Provide up to seven days of post-delivery health care to a new born child of a women veteran.

RURAL HEALTH IMPROVEMENTS

- Improves health care for veterans living in rural areas, including by expanding transportation for veterans to local VA hospitals and clinics through VA grants to local Veterans Service Organizations.

MENTAL HEALTH CARE

- Provides access to counseling and other mental health centers to any member of the Armed Forces (including members of the National Guard and Reserves, who served during Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom but who are no longer on active duty) and
- Requires the VA to conduct a veterans' suicide study.

OTHER HEALTH CARE ISSUES

- Prohibits the VA from collecting copayments from veterans who are catastrophically disabled.
- Creates a pilot program, which would provide specified dental services to veterans, survivors, and dependents of veterans through a dental insurer.
- Requires the VA to provide hospital care, medical services, and nursing home care for certain Vietnam-era veterans exposed to herbicide and Gulf-War era veterans who have insufficient medical evidence to establish a service-connected disability.
- Provides higher priority status for certain veterans who are Medal of Honor recipients.

HOMELESS VETERANS

- Expands the organizations offering transitional housing and other support for homeless veterans that can receive grants or per diems from the VA, which is particularly important to veterans in rural areas.

What Veterans' Organizations Are Saying About the Bill:

Veterans of Foreign Wars

"the bill will make a profound difference to veterans." 3/22/10

The American Legion

"...encompasses a number of pressing legislative initiatives supported by... nearly every major veterans service organization in the country... this legislation offers bold solutions to major challenges facing service members, veterans, and their families." 3/16/10

Disabled American Veterans

"...improve and restore the lives of untold numbers of sick and disabled veterans, and those who care for them in their homes... For the first time in history, VA will be authorized to aid a women veteran with up to seven days of necessary post-natal care of a newborn – an issue that has been pending in Congress for a decade – and to provide new and enhance health services to women veterans in general." 3/18/10

AMVETS

"...goes a long way to ensure severely disabled veteran and their family will have the resources needed to provide quality care inside their own homes... ensure that our rural and remote veterans will have access to care through a variety of initiatives." 3/23/10

Wounded Warriors Project

"At its core, the legislation would ensure that VA will meet the critical needs experienced by families of severely wounded warriors." 3/16/10

Paralyzed Veterans of America

"The passage of S. 1963 as amended will continue to provide valuable benefits for veterans and their families, benefits that they need, have earned, and so richly deserve." 3/19/10