

Chairman Bernie Sanders  
February 4, 2014  
**The Comprehensive Veterans Health and Benefits and  
Military Retirement Pay Restoration Act Of 2014**

Thank you for your attendance today to discuss S.1982, the Comprehensive Veterans Health and Benefits and Military Retirement Pay Restoration Act of 2014.

Behind me you see over 20 representatives from both veterans' and military service organizations who have voiced their support for this comprehensive legislative package. When you visit the Committee's website, you will see the letters of support from nearly three dozen organizations.

As Chairman of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I want to thank these organizations not only for their support, but for their valuable input that led to the writing of this legislation.

This bill is the result of a great deal of *bipartisan* work to address issues raised during congressional hearing in which many of these organizations testified before joint sessions of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees.

In my view, S. 1982 is the most comprehensive piece of veterans' legislation to be offered in decades and addresses many of the challenges facing service members, veterans and their families. It consists of omnibus bills unanimously passed by the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, and bills passed out of Committee with strong bipartisan support. It also includes several new provisions.

This legislation is being co-sponsored by Senators Landrieu, Begich, Schatz, Brown, Blumenthal, Hirono, Heidkamp, Boxer, Whitehouse and Gillibrand. We expect many more co-sponsors in the next few days.

Following are *some* of the provisions in S. 1982.

***Restoration of Full COLA for Military Retirees:*** The Bipartisan Budget Act of 2013 reduced by 1 percent annually, until age 62, the cost-of-living adjustments for military retirees. Despite a recent legislative fix to exclude disabled retirees, more than 900,000 military retirees still face significant cuts to their pensions that could impact their financial well-being and impede their transition back to civilian life. This legislation would restore full cost-of-living adjustments for all military retirees. The need to undo these cuts is something that has strong bi-partisan support.

***Authorization of Major Medical Facility Leases:*** This legislation would authorize VA to enter into 27 major medical facility leases in 18 states and Puerto Rico. This impacts states all across the country. The House of Representatives has already passed legislation

to address this concern. In the Senate, there is wide bi-partisan support to do the same.

***VA Health Care and Dental Care Expansion:*** This legislation includes ground-breaking provisions that would expand access to VA health care – including complementary and alternative medicine – and dental care, in a cost-effective and equitable way. Many of the major veterans’ organizations have been advocating for this for years.

***Advanced Appropriations for VA:*** This legislation would ensure veterans receive consistent access to the benefits they have earned by establishing advanced appropriations for the mandatory accounts at VA. This legislation has bi-partisan support in the Committee.

***Ending the benefits backlog:*** Members from both sides of the aisle have presented legislative ideas, which are included in this bill that would support VA’s ongoing efforts to end the backlog and would make needed improvements to the claims system.

***In-State Tuition Assistance for Post-9/11 Veterans:*** This legislation would give our transitioning service-members a fair shot at attaining their educational goals without incurring an additional financial burden.

***Extension of Health Care Access for Recently Separated Veterans:*** This legislation would extend from five to ten years unfettered access to VA health care for recently separated veterans to address their health care needs early.

***Renew Our VOW to Hire Heroes:*** This legislation would reauthorize provisions from the VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011, including a two-year extension for the Veterans Retraining Assistance Program.

***Sexual Assault:*** This legislation contains important provisions that would improve the delivery of care and benefits to veterans who experienced sexual trauma while serving in the military, which were inspired by Ruth Moore who struggled for 23-years to receive VA disability compensation.

***Reproductive Health:*** This legislation would help female and male veterans who have suffered significant spinal cord, reproductive, and urinary tract injuries start a family.

***Extension of the Caregivers Act:*** This legislation expands a program established several years ago to provide support to the most seriously injured post 9/11 veterans.

This bill authorizes \$15.2 billion in discretionary spending over the next five years. The mandatory spending provisions in this bill will total about \$8.5 billion over the next decade. Over \$4 billion of the mandatory spending in this bill is being offset by savings within the jurisdiction of the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee. The remaining \$20 billion is paid for by putting caps on spending for Overseas Contingency Operations.

The President and the Pentagon have projected that spending on wars will go down as we reduce our troop presence in Afghanistan. This legislation will lock in that savings by

establishing new spending caps on OCO, which are currently not subject to budget limits—and using those projected budget savings to invest in and care for our veterans. Under this legislation, caps on OCO spending will be put in place beginning in fiscal year 2018 and ending in fiscal year 2021 at levels slightly below the Congressional Budget Office's (CBO) baseline estimates. This bill times the new caps to start in 2018 to make sure that the reduction is real and aligned with the Administration's planned reduction in overseas operations.

CBO assumes that spending for overseas contingency operations will total \$1.025 trillion over the next decade. Meanwhile, the Obama Administration has projected that only \$260 billion in OCO spending is needed over the next decade – a difference of some \$800 billion. Spending as a result of this legislation will be a tiny fraction of what would be spent if the war continued at current levels. Sing two percent of the savings for ending the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to improve the lives of our veterans is the least we can do to protect those who have protected us.