

Statement from Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.)

This VA conference committee legislation is far from what I would have written, but it is a compromise that I strongly support.

This bill makes certain that we address the immediate crisis of veterans being forced onto long waiting lists for health care. It strengthens the VA so that it will be able to hire the doctors, nurses and medical personnel it needs so we can permanently put an end to the long waiting lists.

It addresses the very serious problem of accountability and makes certain that dishonest and incompetent senior officials do not remain employed at the VA. And in addition, it provides some other significant benefits for veterans and their families.

Funding for veterans' needs must be considered a "cost of war" and appropriated as "emergency spending." Planes and tanks and guns are a cost of war. So is taking care of the men and women who fight our battles. This was the funding mechanism contained in the Sanders/McCain bill, which passed the Senate by a 93-3 vote. This is the funding mechanism in this conference committee bill, and that is the right thing to do.

Sufficient sums of money must be provided so that the VA has the resources to immediately end unacceptably long waiting times in many VA facilities throughout the country. This bill does that by contracting out with private medical providers, community health centers, Department of Defense facilities and Indian Health Service clinics.

This agreement, consistent with the Sanders/McCain bill, allows veterans who live 40 miles or more from a VA facility to get their health care outside the VA.

This bill provides \$10 billion for the contracting out of health care and to allow veterans to give private care if they 40 miles away from a VA facility.

Acting VA Secretary Sloan Gibson and the major veterans organizations have told us, loudly and clearly, that unacceptably long-waiting lines are significantly caused by a lack of doctors, nurses and other medical personnel in many VA facilities. In the last four years, the VA has seen two million more veterans coming into VA – with a net increase of one and one-half million patients. This legislation will provide \$5 billion for the VA to add doctors and other clinicians as well as address some of the serious space problems at overcrowded VA facilities.

This legislation – consistent with the Sanders-McCain bill and legislation passed by the House – would authorize funding for the VA to enter into leases at 27 medical facilities in 18 states and Puerto Rico. In many instances, these leases would improve access to care closer to home – and would increase the availability of specialty care services in these locations.

We have all been outraged by the manipulation of waiting-time data and by the dishonesty of some VA officials, and by the retaliation against whistle-blowers who tried to expose serious problems. This legislation gives the secretary authority to immediately remove incompetent senior executives based on poor job performance, while providing a 21-day period for due-process and appeals.

This proposal also contains some other provisions that were included in the Sanders-McCain bill. It would:

- Improve the delivery of care to veterans who experienced sexual trauma while serving in the military.
- Expands the John David Fry Scholarship program to include surviving spouses of members of the armed forces who died in the line of duty.
- Let all veterans qualify for in-state tuition under the Post 9/11 GI bill. This bipartisan provision was introduced by the chairman and ranking member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee. A similar provision also passed the House unanimously.
- Extends a program, which is about to expire, that provides housing for veterans who are struggling with traumatic brain injury.

This bill will put some \$17 billion into VA health care over the next several years. There are \$5 billion in offsets that will bring the total cost of the package down to \$12 billion in new funding.

Let me conclude by thanking Senator Harry Reid, a fierce defender of veterans. I also am very grateful for the help of Senator Patty Murray, a former chair of the veterans' committee, for her support and advice. Chuck Schumer and Dick Durbin also have been strong supporters throughout this process.

I also want to express my gratitude to Senator John McCain. Senator McCain and I look at the world very differently and disagree on almost every issue. But he was very strong and helpful in getting the original bill passed and getting this conference report to where we are now.

Lastly, I want to thank Chairman Jeff Miller. I think most Americans understand that Congress is basically dysfunctional. Despite the serious problems facing our country, almost no major legislation is being passed. Jeff Miller believed from Day One that we could get an agreement and that we must get agreement. Despite the many differences between the House and the Senate we finally have reached agreement. It would not have happened without the hard work of Jeff Miller and his staff and the very hard work of my staff on the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee.