

Sen. Ron Wyden Statement for the Congressional Record May 22, 2018
VA MISSION Act of 2018

Mr. WYDEN. Mr. President, with Memorial Day coming up this weekend, I want to offer a few thoughts on this package of legislative reforms for the Department of Veterans Affairs, known as the VA MISSION Act of 2018, being considered by the U.S. Senate.

I want to start by commending Senator Jon Tester of Montana, the senior Democrat on the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, for negotiating based on what I call principled bipartisanship: taking ideas from both parties without sacrificing core values.

Montanans have every reason to be proud of Senator Tester for spending months at the negotiating table with Chairman Isakson, the House of Representatives and the White House.

And make no mistake, the bill before the Senate will make some important reforms to the way the VA does business.

It will consolidate the VA's multiple community care programs, including the Veterans Choice Program, into one permanent framework to allow veterans to seek care in their communities. Streamlining these programs was something sought by the Obama administration as well, and will help make it easier for veterans to understand their options and access the care they need.

It will also expand a VA program that provides benefits to in-home caregivers, an effort I have supported for years. The program is currently open to veterans wounded after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The VA MISSION Act will open the program to veterans from all eras.

And it will provide more incentives and inducements to help attract medical providers to the VA and keep them there. In particular, the bill will provide more recruitment, retention, and relocation bonuses, it will raise the cap on student loan reimbursement, and it will establish a new loan repayment program for specialties where the VA is experiencing a shortage.

As important as these provision are, I want to express my reservations about the VA MISSION Act as well.

I voted for the Choice Act in 2014 because I said it was unacceptable for veterans in Oregon and across the country to be waiting months or driving long hours for a VA appointment. I'll be the first to say the same thing today.

But I fear this bill will give broad authority to VA leadership to send more veterans out of the VA system.

Given the relentless push by special interest groups to send an ever greater number of veterans into the private sector, I am concerned about the Trump administration giving into those folks and turning the VA over to ideologues or privatization partisans.

I am also disappointed to see the asset review provisions included in this bill. If the VA has unnecessary infrastructure, it should be able to make the case to Congress to close or consolidate those facilities just like any other agency without being required to set up a whole new bureaucracy.

Taken together, these provisions strike me as essentially asking Senators to put more trust in VA leadership and Donald J. Trump. The same Donald Trump who publicly attacked the parents of a Muslim soldier killed in action and the same Donald Trump who nominated his wholly unqualified personal physician to run the VA. Unfortunately, this administration has already proven it can't be trusted to take care of our veterans.

I had hoped Senators would be given an opportunity to debate this bill and offer amendments that might have addressed the bill's shortcomings. The Senate majority has prevented that from happening.

And so the choice before me and every other Senator this week is to oppose this bill and the good it will do or to support it with significant reservations.

After hearing from many Oregonians, and from the 38 Veterans and Military Service Organizations and seven former VA Secretaries who support this bill, I have chosen the second option and will support the bill despite my concerns.

Mark my words: the ultimate success or failure of this bill will depend on whether Donald Trump and his team at the VA choose to work with Congress and put our veterans first or whether they sell out to the privatization partisans.

I hope my fears about this bill prove to be unwarranted but as the saying goes, hope is not a strategy. After Donald Trump signs this bill into law, I will redouble my efforts to work with Senator Tester and others to support and sustain a robust VA worthy of the millions of veterans it serves.

And if the Trump administration implements any of these provisions in a way that threatens to privatize or undermine the VA as a healthcare system, I'll pull out all the stops and fight it like hell.