



Key veterans legislation in the 115th Congress

Congress has always made it a priority to consider legislation to improve the lives of the men and women who have served in the military. In fact, during the 115th Congress, some 1,327 bills were introduced in the House and Senate related to veterans' affairs and 70 were signed into law. Many were straightforward and designed to improve issues affecting veterans, some were directly or indirectly harmful to veterans, others affect federal employees specifically as well as veterans, and still more set precedent for how unrelated legislation may be drafted in the future.

While many bills do not directly affect letter carriers, this article highlights and summarizes a few that are important to our members one way or another.

Energy and Water, Legislative Branch, and Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations Act, 2019 (Public Law 115-244)—Signed into law on Sept. 21, 2018

Each year, Congress puts forward an appropriations bill to fund energy and water, the legislative branch, military construction and veterans affairs. While many funding measures do not get signed into law, this year lawmakers were able to agree on a plan that contains a funding boost of more than 6 percent for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in fiscal year 2019. The \$209 billion allocation for the VA in H.R. 5895 includes \$1.1 billion for the start of a VA electronic health records overhaul and \$400 million for opioid abuse prevention within the department.

VA Mission Act (Public Law 115-182)—Signed into law on June 6, 2018

This bill (S. 2372) gives the VA secretary the authority to privatize and consolidate veteran health care programs, including the VA Choice Program, into

a single, permanent Veterans Community Care Program. The \$55 billion bill includes \$5.2 billion in a one-year extension of the VA Choice program until the new system is in place. Some lawmakers were concerned that it does little to actually fix problems within VA and instead simply outsources primary care to the private sector.

Additionally, it establishes a Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC)-style commission that would evaluate VA's infrastructure needs and allows the BRAC process to deplete the VA medical services account without restrictions. Given the enormous cost overruns associated with military BRACs, this is especially concerning to those opposed to it.

Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act of 2017 (Public Law 115-55)—Signed into law on Aug. 23, 2017

H.R. 2288 modernizes the VA appeals process to reduce the number of veterans waiting on VA for an appeals decision. It gives veterans more flexibility to decide how they'd like VA to review a claims decision, including an expedited process for veterans who don't submit new evidence. No matter which option they choose, veterans could preserve the date of their original claim for the purpose of calculating benefits. At the time of enactment, more than 450,000 veterans were waiting for VA to provide them the benefits they earned.

VA Choice and Quality Employment Act of 2017 (Public Law 115-46)—Signed into law on Aug. 12, 2017

Among other provisions, this bipartisan bill (S. 114) provides an additional \$1.4 billion in funding for VA and allows the department to manage non-VA care better than the Choice program. This temporary



fix will allow VA to open 28 new clinics and implement new hiring programs, thereby providing more veterans access to the care they need.

Department of Veterans Affairs Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act of 2017 (Public Law 115-41)—Signed into law on June 23, 2017

This legislation (S. 1094) places arbitrary caps on VA employees' official time, limiting who can use official time, and thereby ensuring professionals do not receive adequate representation. It also restricts due-process rights for new hires by extending the probationary period from 12 to 18 months, limits official representation of union members by chosen leadership, and allows members to revoke their membership at any time. By allowing members to drop in and out of membership at will, the bill interferes with union business solely to undermine the union and reduce overall membership. Additionally, it calls for the secretary of VA to submit an annual report to Congress relating to the use of official time by employees.