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Legislation introduced by members of Michigan Congressional Delegation to streamline patient care at VA

LANSING, Mich. — Two bipartisan bills were introduced today by four members of Michigan’s Congressional delegation to the 117th U.S. Congress, which will streamline VA care nationwide.

The bills that were introduced, “Patient Advocacy Act of 2021” and the “Patient Advocate Tracker Act”, address material deficiencies and understaffing of VA’s Patient Advocate Program. Navy veteran Cameron Zbikowski, who is the former president of the Student Veterans of America (SVA) Chapter at Grand Valley State University, originally identified this issue. For the past six months, he has worked with Representatives John Moolenaar (R), Debbie Dingell (D), Lisa McClain (R), and Elissa Slotkin (D) to have this life saving legislation introduced, on behalf of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Department of Michigan.

“This legislation will save lives and will provide a dramatic leap forward in the quality of care our veterans receive across the country,” said VFW State Commander Kevin Conklin. “The teamwork seen with Representatives Moolenaar, Dingell, McClain and Slotkin, alongside the Veterans of Foreign Wars and Student Veterans of America shows the importance of strengthening and streamlining the VA’s Patient Advocacy program. We are proud that the idea for this legislation came from one of the SVA and VFW’s very own members, Cameron Zbikowski, and we’ll continue to look for solutions from the end users of VA care and programs.”

The current patient advocate tracking system within the United States Department of Veterans Affairs allows for tracking and reporting by the VA, but not the patient, leaving many veterans lost in the bureaucracy of the VA system, and unsure if the help they requested is coming. These pieces of legislation, once enacted, will ensure adequate staffing to support the Patient Advocacy program while at the same time allowing for a high degree of transparency and accountability by the Veterans Health Administration.

“Our veterans deserve to have better service from the VA, and I have heard from many veterans that there are simply not enough patient advocates at the VA,” said Moolenaar. “The legislation we are introducing today will increase the number of patient advocates and improve accountability, so our veterans will receive better care and attention from VA staff. My Michigan colleagues and I have worked across the aisle to introduce these important solutions for our veterans, and we are proud to have the support of the VFW, the SVA, and their members for our legislation today.”

The Veterans Patient Advocacy Act amends VA Policy to clarify that the VA must have one patient advocate for every 13,500 veterans.

"I hear from veterans across Mid-Michigan who have struggled to access the VA care and benefits they've earned," said Slotkin. "Expanding the VA's patient advocacy programs is a commonsense way to improve quality of service and make sure our veterans needs are being met. These two bills will increase transparency at the department and help it operate as efficiently as possible on behalf of our veteran community."

"Veterans deserve to know how, when, and where their complaint is being handled at any given time," said Zbikowski, a U.S. Navy veteran from Grandville, Mich. "Fixing this program will directly impact the quality of care and patient experience of Veterans at VA Medical Centers everywhere."

"This country's veterans put their lives on the line for us and we need to give them the care they deserve," said Dingell. "Currently, VA patient advocates are being assigned to multiple medical centers at a time, leading to a lack of quality care for veterans. This bipartisan legislation would address this challenge by ensuring every veteran has easy access to a patient advocate and that patient advocates have the bandwidth to fulfill their duties."

The Patient Advocacy Tracker Act establishes a tracking metric viewable by the veteran or external representative, in which the veteran can self-submit their complaint, immediately beginning the countdown for resolution.

"The Patient Advocate Tracker Act is common sense legislation that will make the VA more transparent and cause less frustrations for our veterans," said Rep. McClain. "Veterans deserve the best healthcare possible, and when they receive subpar care, they need to be able to easily report complaints to their patient advocate, track it and get the best outcome possible. This bill will simplify the process and help them track their complaints."

The VFW Department of Michigan is an organization dedicated to serving Michigan's roughly 630,000 veterans with legislative representation, medical advocacy, community building and community service. The purpose of the organization is to foster camaraderie among United States veterans of overseas conflicts. To serve veterans, the military and their communities, and advocate on behalf of all veterans.

For more information about the VFW Michigan, visit www.vfwmi.org or call (517) 485-9456.

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