

VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE REPORT, JAN., 2019

by
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1. H. R. 4556 never got out of committee, so it had to be reintroduced. As previously stated, Cong. Carol Shea-Porter, who had introduced it, retired. Our job was to get another congressman to reintroduce it.

I tried Cong. Quigley, but after a wait, we were told that he would cosponsor, but not initiate, the bill. We went to Cong. Lipinski, but they never got back with us. I went to Cong. Danny Davis with the same result. In desperation, I tried Cong. Simpson, because he was a dentist and coauthored H. R. 2422. I also went to Cong. Robin Kelly; while she had co-authored H. R. 2422 (a bill involving dental care, that, with 83 cosponsors, passed), we had a very difficult time in getting her to cosponsor H. R. 4556. Strangely enough, I got an immediate reply to the effect that they would do it. (I had gone straight to their DC office and not the local one.) I discussed it with staffer Matt McMurray, but prior to their reintroducing it, Matt got word that Cong. Julia Brownley had introduced something along that line.

I contacted Brownley's office and learned that she had reintroduced 4556 as H. R. 96. In the 115th Congress, she had been the ranking member of the House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Health, the very place where 4556 had ended up.

I then contacted the offices of Quigley, Lipinski, Danny Davis, Simpson, and Schakowsky, asking them to cosponsor.

We have been getting cosponsors very quickly. As I write this, there are already 27, of which 8 are from Illinois (Quigley, Lipinski, Danny Davis, Rush, Krishnamoorthi, Bustos, Kelly, and Schakowsky). That is great, since there were only 28 cosponsors for 4556.

When congressmen introduce a bill, they send a letter to their colleagues in which they discuss their bill and ask for cosponsors. This is something that the public does not have access to, although I have seen the letter on this bill as well as 4556. For whatever reason, things are looking a lot better than they had been.

As the 116th Congress gets started, committee assignments are being made. Freshman congressmen are just getting their offices up and running, along with their websites and assignments of responsibility within their offices.

2. On 12-1-18, Mark Weiman and I were once again on the America's Heroes Group radio program on WVON. Everything went very well. We did not "pull any punches." Instead, we named names and when asked about what our senators were doing on this dental issue, we told the truth. We will always tell the truth, whether it is negative or positive.

We had invited them to join CVO, but they work with several groups who are “partners.” They invited us to partner with them, expecting me to agree to it on the spot. Because I do not have the authority to make this decision, I said that I would propose it to our Board and get back with them, although I favored it and saw no problem in getting approval. I polled the Board, and it was approved.

Under this arrangement, we will periodically be on the program. JBVAMC is also one of their partners, because Dir. Magill wants to get the word out about what is happening at JBVAMC.

3. While dental care is something that the VA should be providing, we should still look into the possibility that we could get something from the State. We have a new Gov., so we should write to him about our cause. GovernorsOffice@illinois.gov

4. On 12-18-18, there were presentations on the Mission Act of 2018. For the afternoon presentation, Mark Weiman and I were the only veterans (i. e., not connected with the VA or any officials) there. (There had been an earlier presentation for VSOs, and some veterans were at that one.) Representatives of our two senators were present. From the VA side were people from VA HQ, VISN-12, Hines and JBVAMC. The person in charge was the former Navy doctor who had treated Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. Due to the low turnout, we sat in a large circle.

Coming into this, we did not know what to expect. In this presentation, those running the program told us about the Mission Act, and a very large part of this presentation was the solicitation of our desires, complaints, ideas, etc.

The Act was signed on 6-6-18, and is to be implemented on 6-6-19, but the VA is far from ready, and many questions still need to be answered and points finalized. This is clearly not a means of privatizing the VA, nor is it a matter of us choosing where we will get our care. It’s more a matter of us working with our doctors to get us the best health care. For those veterans who live in the Chicago area, the transition will probably be seamless, while it will have a greater impact for those far away from VA hospitals. The Hines Director said that many veterans live within 40 miles of a CBOC, but if they need an MRI, for example, they must go elsewhere. We should assume that everything will be the same after 6-6-19, but as we go along, we will learn more about the changes. In other words, we should proceed with caution.

I brought up the difficulty in communicating with our doctors who work at NMH or U. of IL through the MHV secure messaging system.

I brought up the fact that it takes a great deal of time for a provider to become certified under the Choice Program, and I provided first-hand information. In other words, seeking care under Choice, because one can not get an appointment at the VA facility within 30 days, may not get the appointment on the outside any quicker. There was talk about a need for greater training for

outside providers, and I added that more training was needed for the call-takers, citing a first-hand example.

As for referrals to outside providers, I brought up the fact that while the VA has the fee basis referral program in place, the degree to which such referrals are given is often lacking. Again, I provided a first-hand example.

I asked if, when a provider wants to prescribe something, if he will be restricted to the list of approved VA medicines or will go by the list in his respective hospital. I specifically mentioned that several NMH doctors have said that they can prescribe probiotics at MNH, but that they can not do it here, because it is not on the VA's list. Tamara Jordan, Sen. Durbin's staffer and a vet, said that she was able to get probiotics through the VA. We were told that the VA buys in very large quantities, where prices are negotiated, and that is why we have such a list of "formularies." If, however, one of our providers wants to prescribe something that is not on the list, that he can do it.

We were asked about how we get the word on the VA and vets' issues. I explained that there are various newsletters that various vets get, and that when there is something of interest, that we spam it out. The VA puts out emails to those who are enrolled in MHV. In addition, we get various emails from the VA through several sources, so for this event, we got notifications multiple times. I also mentioned the Great Lakes Health Views from VISN-12, saying that they have articles telling us to: "...say our prayers, take our vitamins, and get our flu shots."

The VA will have ads, and we were asked for our opinions on them. Several slogans ("taglines" for you younger people) were presented, and some suggestions came from the group. Perhaps Cubs Mgr. Joe Maddon's "Try not to suck," would be appropriate.

We brought up our efforts to get dental care, and we were told that this issue was raised in other sessions that they had here (such as the session with VSOs). It appears as though our idea is catching on.

The fact that we were the only vets in attendance builds up our stature and recognition. We now have recognition and respect on the various levels of the VA.

5. The "Illinois Handbook of Government" for 2017-2018 should have come out around June, 2017, but due to the budgetary standoff, it did not, and I had been told that it was not being printed. I wanted to order copies for CVO, but only the 2015-2016 editions were available. That is why I ordered a single copy of the far more expensive hard-cover "Illinois Blue Book." Strangely enough, the 2017-2018 Handbook just came out, so I ordered a shipment for us, and copies are available on our sign-in table.