

VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE REPORT, APRIL, 2020

by

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1. As of this writing, there are now 70 cosponsors for H. R. 96, that would require the VA to treat dental care the same as other medical specialties. With one exception (Cong. Reed, NY), all of the cosponsors for H. R. 4556 (predecessor bill in the previous congress) who are still in congress, have signed on to the new bill. We still need more cosponsors, so do whatever you can. It says that there are 69 Dems and 1 Repub, because Cong. Jefferson Van Drew, who was a dentist prior to Congress, switched parties after he had cosponsored.

2. State Rep. Stephanie Kifowit, a Marine vet, introduced HRJ 84 on 9-17-19, a resolution urging the IL Congressional Delegation to cosponsor/support HR 96. This is patterned after the resolution passed by the Cook County Board. I had asked her to do this, at the direction of Acting IDVA Dir. Linda Chapa LaVia. Please contact your State Rep./Senator to request that they cosponsor this. It is out of committee, so we will have to wait for it to get on the schedule for a vote. It was unanimously approved by the Veterans Affairs Committee.

3. The VA issued a proposal in the Federal Register on Dec. 13, 2019, that acknowledged the need for and importance of dental care. It wants to set up a pilot program (in VISN 12 and 3 others) in major cities (where there are more dentists), whereby vets would get free or discounted treatment through the Mission Act. It appears to depend on dentists who will work for little or nothing, so it is anyone's guess as to exactly what it will provide. Given the loss of business due to COVID-19, many of the dentists who would have worked for gratis will no longer be able to do so.

It passed the House and Senate unanimously and was signed by the President. Mark Weiman communicated with the VA Innovation Office that is responsible for the project. They said that there will be another Federal Register entry with more details, such as which cities will be part of the pilot program. Because this project is for major metropolitan areas, and because VISN-12 is one of the four VISNs they listed, there is a high probability that Chicago will be one of the designated cities.

4. We had hoped to get interns who would contact the congressmen from the other states, but so far, we still have no interns. I was told that we were getting our first intern from DePaul, but in reality, she is a good person who has worked with DePaul's Veterans Advocacy group, and who has dental problems herself, so she sees the need for care for vets. She is not a vet herself. She is currently taking care of her mother who is very ill.

5. At our Feb. meeting, member organizations that were present volunteered to work on the congressional delegations of the states they selected, but so far, we have not had any new cosponsors from those states. We can still contact congressional staffers, even though there is the COVID-19 pandemic.

6. The American Dental Assn./Chicago Dental Soc. held its annual Mid-Winter Meeting at McCormick Place, Feb. 20-22, 2020, attracting attendees worldwide. We were given a free booth, where we hoped to draw attention to our fight to get H. R. 96 passed, with the intention of getting more dentists involved in this fight.

7. Regarding H. R. 3932/S. 1573, that would eliminate copays for preventive treatment, there has been no action. The House version has 36 cosponsors, with only 1 cosponsor from IL, Jesus Garcia (my congressman), although Lauren Underwood was the originator. The Senate version, introduced by Tammy Duckworth, has only 1 cosponsor. Please ask your congressmen to cosponsor it.

8. Christine Kleckner was the JBVAMC Acting Dir. She changed the quarterly Stakeholders Meetings to monthly, on the second Wednesdays. I represented CVO at the March and April meetings. It does not make sense that an acting director would make changes, but now that these are monthly meetings, we will have to see if the new Dir., Rick Ament, will have these meetings monthly or quarterly.

At the April 8 meeting, it was announced that the target date for getting WiFi at the JBVAMC is May 15, and the Pandemic will not affect it.

9. It would probably help our efforts on H. R. 96 if we got some well-known person to advocate for us. Last year, I unsuccessfully tried to get help from the Gary Sinise Foundation, but they replied that they do not get into advocacy.

I saw that the websites of Joe Mantegna and Montel Williams had a means of contacting them, so I tried it. Mantegna is from Chicago and has been a staunch advocate for veterans. Mantegna is a Navy/Marine vet.

10. Military Officers of the World Wars contacted Mark Weiman for information on H. R. 96 that they will get to their members.