

ISSUE BRIEF: EXPANDING CAREGIVER SUPPORT

SITUATION

- All veterans with a severe service-connected injury or illness do not have full access to caregiver support programs and services from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).
- While family caregivers provide the vast majority of care and support to help severely ill or injured veterans successfully recover, reintegrate and achieve their highest quality of life, research shows caregivers routinely encounter negative physical, emotional, and financial consequences.
- To address caregiver burden and strain, Public Law 111-163, the “Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010,” requires VA to provide comprehensive benefits. These include caregiver education and training; travel, lodging and subsistence allowance during initial training and when accompanying the veteran to medical appointments; mental health counseling and services; respite care; a monthly stipend; and health care coverage through the VA’s Civilian Health and Medical Program of Veterans Affairs if the caregiver is not entitled to any other health plan.
- Preliminary data suggests the VA’s Comprehensive Caregiver Support program is effective. There has been a significant decrease among caregivers experiencing the negative psychological, behavioral, and physiological effects of caregiving, as well as a significant decrease in veterans being admitted for inpatient care.

CHALLENGE

- The VA only provides comprehensive benefits to caregivers of veterans severely disabled on or after September 11, 2001. Family caregivers of severely disabled veterans from earlier wars should be allowed to receive the same comprehensive support to address fully the burdens and strains of caregiving.
- For far too long, countless caregivers have been caring for veterans severely ill and injured from previous wars with inadequate support. Without comprehensive caregiver support, the quality of life and health of severely ill and injured veterans and their caregivers will prematurely deteriorate and require more costly care and services from the federal government.

SOLUTION

- To ensure caregivers of all severely ill and injured service-connected veterans receive comprehensive VA caregiver support benefits and services, Congress should pass the “Caregiver Expansion and Improvement Act of 2013,” (H.R. 3383 and S. 851) which would eliminate the date of injury requirement
- Congress should also pass the “Support Our Services to Veterans’ Caregivers Act, H.R. 3672, which would include “serious illness” to the eligibility criteria of the current caregiver program.