

Lawmakers pass emergency funding to extend Choice Program, strengthen VA

The Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act of 2014—commonly referred to as the Choice Act—was passed as a temporary solution to the veterans health care access crisis that was negatively affecting veterans across the country. The Choice Program allowed veterans to see a local private provider if they were waiting more than 30 days for care or lived more than 40 miles from a VA facility.

The goal was to give lawmakers, the Department of Veterans Affairs and veterans service organizations time to come up with a long-term, effective and sustainable solution to the access problems many veterans encountered when trying to get care through the VA.

Soon after taking office, President Trump signed a law that removed the Aug. 7, 2017, expiration date of the law and authorized the VA to use funding dedicated to the Veterans Choice Program until it was exhausted. But that came more quickly than the VA anticipated, and the program was set to run out of money before the August deadline.

Before the August recess, lawmakers scrambled to pass legislation that would provide additional resources for Choice services and prevent a disruption in care for veterans using the program. However, there was disagreement over the proposal that granted emergency resources for Choice but authorized no additional funding investment for the VA to address crucial employment and infrastructure needs.

In a joint letter sent to Congress from major veterans service organizations—DAV, AMVETS, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, Military Officers Association of America, Military

Order of the Purple Heart, Veterans of Foreign Wars and Wounded Warrior Project—advocates called on Congress not to pass such “unacceptable funding legislation.”

“In order to ensure that veterans can receive necessary care without interruption, we call on House leaders to take the time necessary to work together with Senate leaders to develop acceptable ‘Choice’ funding legislation that not only fills the current funding gap but also addresses urgent VA infrastructure and resource needs that led to creation of the ‘Choice’ program in the first place,” says the letter.

The push back from DAV and fellow veterans service organizations, along with strong grassroots action, was successful, and a new bipartisan bill passed Congress on Aug. 2. The legislation signed by the president appropriates \$2.1 billion—without having to meet offset requirements—to continue funding the current Choice Program for approximately another six months. Equally important, this final compromise version of the bill authorizes 28 urgently needed, community-based VA outpatient facility leases to expand veterans’ access to health care, as well as provide the VA with new tools and authorities to recruit, hire and retain high-quality medical professionals.

“We are particularly appreciative that, in crafting the final agreement on this important legislation, they worked closely with DAV and other veterans service organizations who are accredited by VA to represent the interests of America’s 21 million veterans,” said DAV Washington Headquarters Executive Director Garry Augustine. “We look forward to continuing our work with the House and Senate Committees on Veterans’ Affairs to reform and modernize the VA health care system so that all veterans have timely access to high-quality, veteran-focused health care, regardless of where they live.”