Fighting ‘tooth’ and nail

Proposed bill would expand VA dental care to more veterans

Veterans enrolled in the Department of Veterans Affairs health care system could benefit from the VA’s dental program if new legislation moves forward. H.R. 4556—introduced by Rep. Carol Shea-Porter—would require the VA to offer comprehensive dental care to all 9.1 million veterans currently enrolled for VA health care.

Currently, only veterans with a service-connected disability rating of 100 percent, veterans with a service-connected dental condition, former prisoners of war and homeless veterans are eligible for VA dental care.

Dental care is also available if the dental condition is affecting the veteran’s service-connected condition or complicates treatment.

DAV Resolution Number 018 calls for the VA to provide comprehensive dental care to all service-connected disabled veterans within the VA health care system.

“Dental care is an integral part of an individual’s overall health, and we should treat it as such,” said National Legislative Director Joy Ilem. “All service-disabled veterans who utilize VA medical services should also be afforded dental care as part of a comprehensive health benefits package that encompasses VA’s ‘whole veteran’ approach.”
According to the U.S. surgeon general, individuals who are medically compromised or have disabilities are at greater risk for oral diseases. Oral disease jeopardizes overall health and can be progressive, cumulative and more complex over time. Poor dental health often significantly damages a person’s quality of life.

Almost 70 percent of Americans over age 65 have been diagnosed with periodontal diseases, which range from simple gum inflammation to serious diseases that result in damage to soft tissue and bone, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Poor oral health negatively affects emotional well-being, as well as the ability to complete daily tasks such as speaking, eating and expressing emotions.

“There is plenty of research that shows us how essential good dental care is to health, so it only makes sense for veterans to be provided the same standards for dental care as for their health care,” added Ilem. “Right now, there are too many limitations that prevent veterans from obtaining this essential health benefit. This bill would eliminate these restrictions on eligibility for VA dental care, allowing all veterans that are enrolled in the VA system to access in-house dental care.”

The bill phases in the new eligibility over five years to give the VA time to invest in and increase its capacity to provide dental care.

Learn More

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