

they receive while utilizing the post-9/11 GI Bill. This is, as we have all said, a commonsense fix to this problem. It requires the VA to make documentation for the post-9/11 GI Bill monthly housing stipend accessible and available online. That is it.

Student veterans will use this documentation to provide needed verification to housing agents, apartment managers, and potential landlords. This bill would provide a permanent solution to the inadequacy of the statement of benefits that is currently available—an official form, accessible online, that verifies the housing benefit is necessary and builds upon existing website functionality. The VA's eBenefits site already provides access to certification letters for VA compensation and pension benefits.

Mr. Speaker, this fix could have a big effect. There are close to 1.1 million student veterans using the post-9/11 GI Bill who would be eligible to benefit from this.

Mr. Speaker, our veterans have earned this benefit. We, as elected officials, feel a responsibility to make sure that they do not face bureaucratic hurdles that prevent them from taking advantage of all of the benefits that they have earned.

I would like to close by thanking Dr. ROE and Ranking Member WALZ for their role in bringing this bill to the floor and for their work on behalf of all of our Nation's veterans.

Mr. WALZ. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman from Connecticut once again. This is a good piece of legislation. It will speed the benefits that were earned by our Nation's veterans.

Mr. Speaker, I urge my colleagues to support H.R. 3634, and I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Mr. Speaker, I thank the sponsor of the bill, Mr. HIMES, first of all, for holding the roundtables and the town halls—they mean so much—and identifying the problem. We are solving it here today, so I appreciate all of the support for this bill.

Mr. Speaker, I yield back the balance of my time.

□ 1600

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. VALADAO). The question is on the motion offered by the gentleman from Florida (Mr. BILIRAKIS) that the House suspend the rules and pass the bill, H.R. 3634.

The question was taken; and (two-thirds being in the affirmative) the rules were suspended and the bill was passed.

A motion to reconsider was laid on the table.

VETERANS FAIR DEBT NOTICE ACT OF 2017

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Mr. Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and pass the bill (H.R. 3705) to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to require the use of

certified mail and plain language in certain debt collection activities, as amended.

The Clerk read the title of the bill.

The text of the bill is as follows:

H.R. 3705

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.

This Act may be cited as the “Veterans Fair Debt Notice Act of 2017”.

SEC. 2. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS NOTICE RELATING TO DEBT COLLECTION ACTIVITIES.

(a) *DEBT NOTIFICATION LETTERS.*—The Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall collaborate with veterans service organizations to write a standard letter to be provided to individuals who the Secretary determines owe debts to the Department of Veterans Affairs. Such letter shall be written in plain language and shall include a notice of the debt and a clear explanation of—

(1) *why the individual owes money to the Department of Veterans Affairs; and*

(2) *the options available to the individual.*

(b) *DELIVERY OF LETTERS.*—The Secretary shall develop a method by which individuals may elect to receive debt notification letters by electronic means and shall ensure, to the extent practicable, that the letter developed under subsection (a) is delivered to intended recipients who have made such an election by both standard mail and by electronic means and to intended recipients who have not made such an election only by standard mail.

(c) *NOTICE TO CONGRESS.*—

(1) *NOTICE OF COMPLETION.*—Upon completion of the letter required under subsection (a), the Secretary shall submit to Congress notice of the completion of the letter.

(2) *PROGRESS REPORTS.*—If the Secretary has not submitted the notice required by paragraph (1) by the date that is 90 days after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Secretary shall—

(A) *submit to Congress a report describing the progress of the Secretary toward implementing subsection (a) and an explanation for why the letter has not been completed; and*

(B) *every 30 days thereafter until the submission of the notice required by paragraph (1), submit to Congress an update to the report under subparagraph (A) that includes an additional explanation for the failure to complete the letter.*

(d) *STUDY; REPORT.*—

(1) *STUDY.*—The Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall conduct a study on the process by which the Department of Veterans Affairs notifies veterans of debt collection efforts. Such study shall include—

(A) *an analysis of the scope of the problem of veterans not receiving debt collection notices;*

(B) *a description of any non-legislative actions the Secretary could take to reduce the number of incorrect or unknown addresses of veterans in the databases of the Department and a timeline for adopting such actions; and*

(C) *an estimate of the costs associated with sending debt collection notices by certified mail.*

(2) *REPORT.*—Not later than 12 months after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Secretary shall submit to Congress a report on the study conducted under paragraph (1).

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the rule, the gentleman from Florida (Mr. BILIRAKIS) and the gentleman from Minnesota (Mr. WALZ) each will control 20 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from Florida.

GENERAL LEAVE

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members have 5 legislative days in which to re-

visé and extend their remarks and to include extraneous material on H.R. 3705, as amended.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from Florida?

There was no objection.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of H.R. 3705, as amended, the Veterans Fair Debt Notice Act of 2017, introduced by Congresswoman PINGREE from Maine.

This bill would help ensure that beneficiaries who have received an overpayment from VA clearly understand why the Department believes the veteran owes the money.

Under VA's current practice, when the Department determines that a beneficiary may have received an overpayment, it sends a letter to the beneficiary that explains why the debt was created and how the veteran can dispute or mitigate the debt. But if VA doesn't have the veteran's current address, the veteran may miss important deadlines. For example, if the beneficiary intends to request a full waiver of the debt but does not request that waiver within 30 days of the date of the letter, VA may take action to withhold benefits until the waiver request is adjudicated.

Sound confusing?

It certainly is. We can't have that for our veterans.

Another issue is that some veterans find the language used in the letters to be unclear and confusing. I am sure that is true, too. It is only fair that the veteran understands why the Department believes he or she owes the money. It is the least we can do.

H.R. 3705, as amended, would require VA to develop a new notification letter that explains in plain language how the alleged debt was created and what actions the veteran can take to dispute or mitigate the debt.

In addition, the bill would direct VA to study and report to Congress on its current debt collection process, including how many veterans are not receiving debt collection notices because of incorrect addresses. The report would also describe the steps VA will take to reduce the number of incorrect addresses in the Department's databases.

Mr. Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. WALZ. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

I feel like we are on a roll, Mr. Speaker. We should stay here all day. Bipartisan, commonsense legislation improving the lives of veterans, it kind of feels like what we came here for.

I rise in strong support of another one of those, H.R. 3705, as amended, the Veterans Fair Debt Notice Act introduced by the gentlewoman from Maine (Ms. PINGREE).

Again, you heard it from the vice chairman, if a veteran incurs an overpayment in benefits, VA sends out a series of letters notifying him or her of

this debt and the steps that can be taken to address the issue. The letter is time stamped when mailed and, if what VA is asking for is not received within a specific timeline, the veteran loses the ability to take certain actions toward addressing or disputing the debt.

Many veterans come to every one of our offices reporting never receiving these letters. I know all of us have heard that story. These are people who I know and trust. It got sent to the wrong address, something happened, and they never got it.

Further, the letter VA is sending is full of complicated legal terms and citations of public laws. We know these letters alarm and confuse veterans unnecessarily. I have personally had them come in, show them to me, and as the ranking member of the Veterans' Affairs Committee—and it is a VA letter—I don't understand what they are asking for in this from a veteran who receives it out of nowhere.

The bill before us today represents a real bipartisan effort to ensure that veterans get timely notices of overpayments or debt, and that these notices are respectful, informative, helpful, and collaborative.

It does it in three ways. First, H.R. 3705, as amended, directs the Secretary to develop a way veterans may elect to receive debt notification letters by email in addition to receiving standard mail notices. Imagine that in 2017.

Second, it directs VA to conduct a study of the problem of veterans not receiving debt letters and to provide a description of the nonlegislative actions the Secretary could take to reduce the number of incorrect addresses, particularly by using the other VHA databases.

At this point in time, I would also note we are taking steps in our committee to make sure now, when you leave the service, that we are able to capture emails, we are able to capture alternate addresses to make sure because a lot of times veterans are in transition, they are moving, those types of things are happening.

Third and most importantly, the bill requires that, in the future, debt notices provide a clear explanation in understandable language for why the debt is owed and what due process options a veteran has available to her or him.

The CBO has estimated the cost of this measure to be insignificant.

The approaches in the bill are the first steps to remedying a longstanding problem and will make a positive change for the thousands of veterans who receive overpayment notices.

Mr. Speaker, I want to thank Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs Subcommittee Chairman MIKE BOST and Ranking Member ELIZABETH ESTY for working together on this legislation, in addition to Dr. ROE. We are also going to hear from the author of this piece of legislation. Certainly I encourage support of H.R. 3705.

Mr. Speaker, I yield 4 minutes to the gentlewoman from Maine (Ms. PIN-

GREE), who is the author of this good, smart, overdue piece of legislation.

Ms. PINGREE. Mr. Speaker, I thank the ranking member for yielding me the time and for all those wonderful compliments. I don't know that I have ever had that said about a bill that I have submitted, so I am very happy to be here today and to be able to support the Veterans Fair Debt Notice Act.

Mr. Speaker, as you heard, this bill offers a commonsense fix to frustrations that veterans in my district and across the country have experienced with VA's debt management system.

Veterans in Maine have called my office shocked to find out that they owe VA money. Some are confused by the letters they receive. Others are told by VA that they have missed important deadlines to dispute, to seek forgiveness, or to create a payment plan for the alleged debt.

Regardless of whether the debt is real or a mistake by VA, we shouldn't make it so hard for veterans to know their rights and obligations.

We have seen single mom veterans who can't get a home loan and newly transitioned servicemembers who struggle to reintegrate with garnished pay, recouped tax returns, and reduced disability payments, all because of assigned debts they knew nothing about after notifications got sent to the wrong place or "lost in the mail."

In response, H.R. 3705 directs VA to work with veterans service organizations to develop standard notification letters that are written in plain language. It also directs VA to explore how to inform veterans of debts more quickly by sending notifications electronically, like an email, in addition to standard mail.

It requires VA to study why so many veterans have not received notifications in the mail, as well as steps VA can take to improve its address database and the costs using certified mail.

I thank Chairmen ROE and BOST and Ranking Members WALZ and ESTY for bringing this legislation to the House floor, and I urge its passage.

Mr. WALZ. In closing, Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentlewoman from Maine for her remarks. This is a good piece of legislation. As I have said, everybody who serves in this House has received veterans in their office either carrying this letter or talking about a letter they never received. This makes it much better. It gives the benefit of the doubt back to the veteran and makes it easier for them to get this solved in the right manner.

Mr. Speaker, please join me in support of H.R. 3705, and I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Mr. Speaker, let's pass this good bill, and I yield back the balance of my time.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The question is on the motion offered by the gentleman from Florida (Mr. BILIRAKIS) that the House suspend the rules and pass the bill, H.R. 3705, as amended.

The question was taken.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. In the opinion of the Chair, two-thirds being in the affirmative, the ayes have it.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Mr. Speaker, on that I demand the yeas and nays.

The yeas and nays were ordered.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to clause 8 of rule XX, further proceedings on this motion will be postponed.

VETERANS APPRENTICESHIP AND LABOR OPPORTUNITY REFORM ACT

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Mr. Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and pass the bill (H.R. 3949) to amend title 38, United States Code, to provide for the designation of State approving agencies for multi-State apprenticeship programs for purposes of the educational assistance programs of the Department of Veterans Affairs, as amended.

The Clerk read the title of the bill.

The text of the bill is as follows:

H.R. 3949

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.

This Act may be cited as the "Veterans Apprenticeship and Labor Opportunity Reform Act" or the "VALOR Act".

SEC. 2. DESIGNATION OF STATE APPROVING AGENCIES FOR MULTI-STATE APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAMS.

Paragraph (1) of subsection (c) of section 3672 of title 38, United States Code, is amended to read as follows:

"(1)(A) The State approving agency for a multi-State apprenticeship program is—

"(i) for purposes of approval of the program, the State approving agency for the State in which the headquarters of the apprenticeship program is located; and

"(ii) for all other purposes, the State approving agency for the State in which the apprenticeship program takes place.

"(B) In this paragraph, the term 'multi-State apprenticeship program' means a non-Federal apprenticeship program operating in more than one State that meets the minimum national program standards, as developed by the Department of Labor."

SEC. 3. ELIMINATION OF CERTAIN CERTIFICATION REQUIREMENT FOR ASSISTANCE FOR APPRENTICESHIP AND OTHER ON-JOB TRAINING.

Section 3680(c) of title 38, United States Code, is amended by striking "shall have received—" and all that follows through "person's certificate," and inserting "receives from the training establishment a certification".

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the rule, the gentleman from Florida (Mr. BILIRAKIS) and the gentleman from Minnesota (Mr. WALZ) each will control 20 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from Florida.

GENERAL LEAVE

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members have 5 legislative days in which to revise and extend their remarks and to include extraneous material on H.R. 3949, as amended.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from Florida?