STATEMENT OF
MATTHEW J. SHUMAN DIRECTOR
NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIVISION
THE AMERICAN LEGION

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ON

"H.R. 5413, IMPROVING VETERANS ACCESS TO CONGRESSIONAL SERVICES ACT OF 2018 & H.R. 6418, THE VA WEBSITE ACCESSIBILITY ACT OF 2018"

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Chairman Dunn, Ranking Member Brownley, and distinguished members of this critical subcommittee, on behalf of National Commander Brett P. Reistad and the 2 million members of The American Legion, the country's largest patriotic wartime veterans service organization, we thank you for the opportunity to testify on the H.R. 5413, the Improving Veterans Access to Congressional Services Act of 2018 & H.R. 6418, the VA Website Accessibility Act of 2018.

H.R. 5413

To direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to permit Members of Congress to use facilities of the Department of Veterans Affairs for the purposes of meeting with constituents, and for other purposes.

In 2017, Representative Brian Mast, a special-forces combat veteran and Veterans Health Administration patient, opened the first-ever congressional office at the West Palm Beach Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC). The purpose of this office is to meet with constituents, primarily veteran constituents receiving healthcare at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Working with then VA Secretary, Dr. David Shulkin, an office was dedicated for congressional use in late 2017.[1] The West Palm Beach VAMC services four different congressional districts, and VA supplied the office space, but required the space be shared between the four Members of Congress who represent the area.

The Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs has the authority to provide office space for Members of Congress. This is the same authority used to open the office in West Palm Beach. Congressman Mast has shared the process for obtaining this authorization is arduous and time-consuming. It took him more than a year to open the West Palm Beach location.

H.R. 5413, the *Improving Veterans Access to Congressional Services Act of 2018*, will direct the Secretary of VA to permit Members of Congress to use VA facilities to meet with constituents. This bill will afford Members of Congress the ability to have physical offices at VA Medical Centers, allowing them to meet with and assist their veteran constituents with VA claims, earned

[1] https://cbs12.com/news/local/rep-brian-mast-to-open-new-office-inside-va-medical-center-in-west-palm-beach

benefits, and to receive comments about care received at their local VAMC. The bill also requires VA to develop regulations regarding the use of agency office space by Members of Congress, mandating that space is made available during normal business hours and in a location that is easily accessible to the Member's constituents.

The American Legion, when invited to testify before this committee, engaged Representative Mast's congressional office, as well as the other Members sharing the space in the West Palm Beach VAMC, to learn more about the creation and day-to-day operations. Congressman Mast's District Director, who manages their weekly office hours, explained the agreement to provide office space in the facility shared among the four Members of Congress who represent the area, is on a rotating basis. Each of the four members offices is assigned a day of the week to staff the office from 10:00 am to 2:00 pm. The American Legion agrees expanding access to services, especially congressional services is a good thing, however, our experience also makes us wary of possible negative unintended consequences.

The use of this potentially valuable resource appears to vary greatly among Members. Whereas Congressman Mast often personally maintains a presence in the location and his office has had great success in engaging the veteran community, other members sharing the space do not seem to have the same level of commitment or resources to fulfill such a presence. For example, in Congressman Mast's May 16th, 2018, testimony before the full House Veterans' Affairs Committee, he expressed that his VA office, in only five months of existence, had conducted more than 250 meetings with veterans, their families and caregivers, and has opened more than 110 individual constituent cases to assist veterans. [2] In contrast, other offices indicate the office space is used as little as once a month and provides minimal value. The American Legion is not only concerned that VA will be required to provide space to congressional members who may further limit space currently available for necessary healthcare services, but that this valuable space may be underutilized.

The American Legion is adamant in ensuring both VA and our representative government are accessible to all veterans. We are also concerned an office of this type will be little more than a "Complaint Department," where veterans will express only issues and concerns about VA care, services, and VA employees.

The American Legion, in order to support this bill, calls on this committee to augment the *Improving Veterans Access to Congressional Services Act of 2018,* to create a pilot program with quantifiable criteria that will yield empirical data to show the potential efficacy of this legislation to conclusively determine the value to veterans.

The American Legion applauds and appreciates the intentions, efforts, and leadership of Congressman Mast, particularly as a fellow veteran. His effort, which we can all learn from, highlights the desire of a Member of Congress who understands the value of firsthand engagement with veteran stakeholders in the VA healthcare system. The American Legion, the largest representative of those stakeholders, will continue researching and working with this committee, Representative Mast's congressional office, and our membership of wartime veterans to determine

[2] https://mast.house.gov/2018/5/mast-testifies-before-va-committee-on-his-legislation-encouraging-congressional-offices-at-va-facilities

our position and course of action, to best serve those who have selflessly raised their right hands and taken the oath to protect this great nation.

The American Legion supports H.R. 5413 with recommended amendments.

H.R. 6418

To direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to conduct a study regarding the accessibility of websites of the Department of Veterans Affairs to individuals with disabilities.

20 USC 794d § 508 (Section 508), of the *Rehabilitation Act* establishes requirements for electronic and information technology developed, maintained, procured, or used by the federal government. Section 508 requires federal electronic and information technology to be accessible to people with disabilities, including employees, and members of the public. An accessible information technology system is one that is operated in a variety of ways and does not rely on a single sense or user ability.

The *VA Website Accessibility Act of 2018,* is not proposing any changes to Section 508. H.R. 6418 requires VA to examine all websites (including attached files and web-based applications) of VA to determine whether such websites are accessible to individuals with disabilities in accordance with Section 508. Further, H.R. 6418 requires VA to compile a complete list of non-compliant websites and submit a plan to Congress to make these websites compliant with the requirements of Section 508.

The American Legion is thankful and applauds the leadership of Representative Esty for creating this legislation, which, in time, will assist VA in becoming more user friendly to veterans in need.

The American Legion supports H.R. 6418.

Conclusion

The American Legion thanks this committee for the opportunity to elucidate the position of the nearly 2 million veteran members of this organization. For additional information regarding this testimony, please contact the Senior Legislative Associate, Mr. Larry Lohmann, at The American Legion's Legislative Division at (202) 861-2700 or llohmann@legion.org.