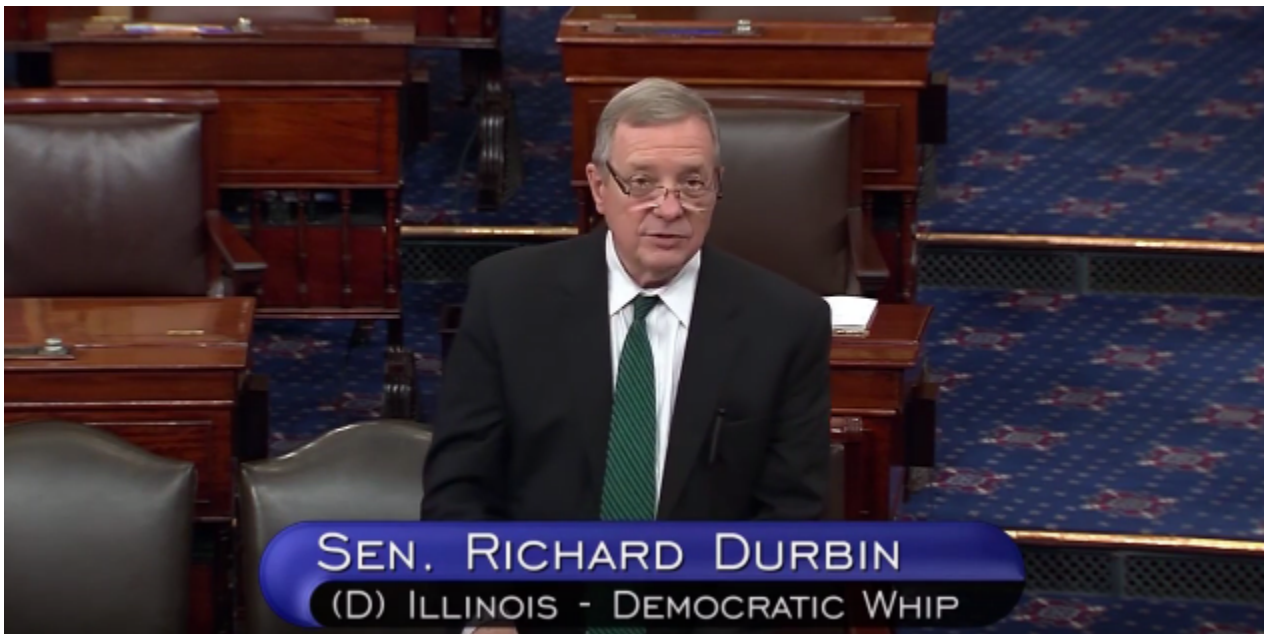


DURBIN: Comprehensive legislation to improve services for veterans introduced in Senate

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Legislation will address disability claims backlog, expansion of benefits, efforts to reduce homelessness, VA accountability & whistleblower protections

Legislation includes Durbin-led initiatives to expand veteran caregivers program, authorize master's program grants for orthotics & prosthetics research and restore GI benefits if a veteran is misled by a for-profit college that closes

– U.S. Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL) today announced that comprehensive and bipartisan legislation to change the culture at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and better serve America's veterans and their families was introduced in the Senate.

The *Veterans First Act* also includes numerous provisions to improve services for our nation's veterans, including expanding a VA program that allows seriously-injured veterans to receive care in their own homes, enhancing programs for veterans' mental health care, and beginning to address the VA's massive backlog of veteran disability claims appeals. The bill will also give the VA the tools to fire bad actors, prohibit bonuses for employees accused of wrongdoing and institute protections for whistleblowers.

“To the men and women who have served our country, we made a commitment to provide access to the best health care, education, jobs and housing,” said Durbin. “Yet, too often, veterans find themselves facing challenge after challenge, not only suffering from the physical and mental wounds of war, but also struggling to find work or a home. At the same time, the VA has struggled to keep up with demand which has resulted in cases of mismanagement of programs, mistreatment of veterans and nationwide scandals.

“Today’s legislation will help hold those responsible for misconduct accountable and put in place a system to modernize the VA’s operations while improving and expanding services for veterans,” Durbin continued. “I am grateful to Senators Isakson and Blumenthal for shepherding this effort through the Senate, and I am proud to join them in this comprehensive and bipartisan bill.”

The *Veterans First Act* includes language based on the following pieces of legislation that were introduced by Durbin earlier this year:

[VA Family Caregivers Expansion and Improvement Act of 2015](#): Today’s legislation includes a provision that would expand the VA Family Caregivers Program to all eligible veterans who were severely injured while serving our country. The VA has estimated that as many as 88,000 additional veteran caregivers could qualify for the program under its expansion and it will continue to save taxpayer dollars as a cost-effective alternative to full-time, institutional care. The VA Family Caregiver Program was modeled on a bill Durbin introduced and was enacted by the *2010 Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act*. It provides technical, financial, and practical support to family caregivers of post-9/11 veterans seriously injured in the line of duty. The program has been wildly successful, with more than 23,000 active participants nationwide. Introduced in March 2015, the *VA Family Caregivers Expansion and Improvement Act* was cosponsored by U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin (D-WI).

[Veterans Day Moment of Silence Act](#): Today’s legislation directs the President to issue an annual proclamation on Veterans Day for the United States to observe two minutes of silence in honor of the service and sacrifices of our veterans. This language is based on legislation Durbin introduced with U.S. Senator Mark Kirk (R-IL) last year. It was

approved in November 2015 by the Senate, but has been awaiting action in the House of Representatives.

Wounded Warrior Workforce Enhancement Act: Today's legislation includes language authorizing \$5 million to the VA to develop partnerships with institutions of higher education to establish or expand programs of advanced degrees in prosthetics and orthotics. There are only a dozen schools around the country with master's programs in this field, and the demand for orthotics and prosthetic services are high despite a shrinking workforce. This provision will help enhance the availability of high quality prosthetic and orthotic care for our veterans. Introduced in April 2015, the Wounded Warrior Workforce Enhancement Act was cosponsored by U.S. Senators Chris Murphy (D-CT) and led by U.S. Representative Matt Cartwright (D-PA) in the House.

Today's legislation also includes two bills Durbin cosponsored to help protect veterans from unscrupulous colleges and worthless programs.

- The *Veterans Education Relief and Restoration Act* would provide the Secretary the authority to reinstate GI Bill benefits for students whose schools close abruptly and extend housing benefits for students who would otherwise not receive them. This legislation would help protect GI Bill benefits for those Veterans left without recourse by the misconduct of schools like Corinthian Colleges.
- The *Career Ready Student Veterans Act* would ensure that only accredited programs of study that prepare veterans for employment in that field are eligible for GI Bill benefits. In some cases, a school may have institutional accreditation but lack programmatic accreditation when it is necessary for a veteran completing that program to be licensed in that field in order to find employment in that field.