

Senate passes several Duckworth amendments to help small businesses, make government more efficient

September 19 2017 9:10 AM



WASHINGTON, DC – The Senate tonight overwhelmingly passed four proposals authored by combat Veteran and U.S. Senator Tammy Duckworth (D-IL) as part of the Fiscal Year 2018 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). If the NDAA – which passed the Senate on a bipartisan vote of 89-8 – becomes law, Duckworth's provisions

will help prevent low-income Servicemembers from going hungry, make it easier for small businesses to get Department of Defense contracts, make government federal contracting more efficient, and help ensure the long-term success of the Rock Island Arsenal.

“The brave men and women in uniform who are deployed across the globe deserve to know that our country stands behind them as they risk their lives to defend our country and our Constitution,” said Senator Duckworth. **“While this legislation is not perfect, it expresses that commitment and I am extremely proud four of my proposals to the bill were included. When they become law, Illinois’s small businesses will have a better shot at securing new contracts, the Rock Island Arsenal’s long-term future will be more certain, the federal contracting process will become more efficient, and our nation will be one step closer to ensuring that our Servicemembers and their families can support their families without worrying about going hungry.”**

The NDAA funds the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD), sets our nation’s defense policy, and ensures that our Servicemembers have the tools they need to defend our nation. Duckworth also filed a number of different amendments to the NDAA that would have expanded parental leave in the military, provided counseling and treatment for Servicemembers struggling with opioid addiction, limited the over-prescribing of opioids among Servicemembers, helped Servicemembers struggling with student debt, improved the interoperability of DOD and the VA’s electronic health record system, and helped Servicemembers transitioning to civilian life sign up for Veterans Affairs benefits.

“Moving forward, I will continue to fight for every person who is willing to put their life on the line in service to this great nation,”added Senator Duckworth. **“I will continue working with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to improve Servicemembers’ transitions to civilian life, increase access to counseling and treatment for Servicemembers struggling with opioid addiction, expand parental leave for members of the military and pass an AUMF that gives our troops the moral support and legal backing they deserve.”**

Duckworth’s amendments that were included in the Senate-passed NDAA would:

- **Make It Easier for Small Businesses to Get Department of Defense Contracts.** Duckworth’s amendment would help small businesses as they apply for contracting and subcontracting opportunities with the Department of Defense by ensuring Commercial Marketing Representatives (CMRs) at the Small Business Administration are fully empowered to guide them in the process and to advocate for them with the Department of Defense and its contractors. Commercial Market

Representatives are located out in our communities, stationed at area offices and play a critical role in linking small businesses with contracting opportunities.

- **Help Prevent Low-Income Servicemembers from Going Hungry.** Surveys have found that as many as 23,000 active duty Servicemembers rely on food stamps to support their families and that active duty Servicemembers spent over \$21 million in SNAP benefits at commissaries between September, 2014 and August, 2015. However, in the Department of Defense does not collect data on how many Servicemembers rely on food assistance programs. Duckworth's amendment would change that by establishing an entity in the Department of Defense to coordinate with the Department of Agriculture to collect and share data on how many active duty Servicemembers are using federal food assistance so the military has the information necessary to effectively ensure no one willing to risk their lives for our nation struggled to put food on the table for their families.
- **Help Ensure Long Term Success of Rock Island Arsenal.** Duckworth, along with U.S. Senators Dick Durbin (D-IL), Chuck Grassley (R-IA) and Joni Ernst (R-IA) filed a bipartisan amendment that will help reduce government waste and ensure the long-term success of the Rock Island Arsenal. The Senators' bipartisan amendment would ensure DOD first seeks out existing government owned spaces on military installations like Rock Island to house government offices before leasing commercial space for government purposes. The amendment will also help prevent the Arsenal's closing in any future base realignment and closure (BRAC) processes by ensuring DOD uses Rock Island's facilities more efficiently.
- **Make Government Federal Contracting More Efficient.** Duckworth's good government amendment will improve agency efficiency and reduce wasteful bureaucracy by eliminating red tape that forces contracting officers to waste time and energy writing hundreds of thousands of separate cumbersome contracts to buy basic goods and services that may be purchased faster, at lower cost and with greater oversight, using the existing government purchase card program.

Duckworth also proposed the following amendments to the NDAA:

- **Expanding Parental Leave in the Military for New Parents.** Senator Duckworth's amendment would have required DOD to offer 12 full weeks of both maternity and paternity leave to new parents regardless of whether their gender and marital status. Her proposal, which builds upon a recent expansion of maternity leave at DOD to 12 weeks, would make the military more accommodating to Servicemembers with growing families. Duckworth proposed granting leave to new parents when a child is born, adopted or placed in the foster care of a Servicemember. Duckworth introduced similar legislation last year. She said at the time: **"Our military readiness also depends on the strong and resilient families that make up its backbone—families that deserve a 21st century parental leave policy that allows them the time they need to bond with their new children. I**

hope Congress will step up and pass my *Military Parental Leave Modernization Act* to secure the rights and protections that all new parents, both in and out of uniform, deserve—doing so will only make our military stronger and more competitive.”

- **Limit Over-Prescribing of Opioids Among Servicemembers.** At a time when the opioid crisis is reaching new and alarming heights, this amendment would have required health care professionals from the Department of Defense who prescribe opioids to be regularly trained on pain management treatment guidelines and best practices, on early detection of opioid addiction, and on treatment and management of opioid-dependent patients. Duckworth’s amendment would have required the Secretary of Defense to meet the same training standards that have been adopted by medical and pharmaceutical governing bodies like The American Medical Association, The American Psychiatric Association, The American Society of Addiction Medicine and The American Academy of Pain Management.
- **Provide Counseling & Treatment for Opioid Addiction & Substance Abuse to Servicemembers Transitioning out of the Military.** When a Servicemember is transitioning out of the military, DOD provides one final medical exam, which they may use to refer a patient for follow-up medical care. Duckworth’s amendment would add counseling and treatment for opioid addiction and substance use disorders to the list of medical conditions – like PTSD – for which DOD can refer patients to receive care. Health providers would also provide alternatives to opioids to treat chronic pain management.
- **Help Servicemembers Transitioning to Civilian Life Sign Up for Veterans Affairs Benefits.** Duckworth’s amendment would have required the Secretary of Defense to consult with the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and issue a report on how to improve the way retirements and medical discharges are processed. Specifically, the report would address whether Servicemembers should be required to do the following before they are discharged from the Armed Forces: apply for Veterans Affairs benefits, undergo compensation and benefits examinations, and determine how to improve the timeliness of the process of transitioning Servicemembers who are undergoing a medical discharge.
- **Make Higher Education More Affordable for Our Nation’s Heroes by Capping Interest Rates on Servicemembers’ Student Loans at 6%.** This amendment was drawn from a bipartisan bill Senators Duckworth and Durbin re-introduced earlier this year, which caps the interest rate on consolidated student loans for Servicemembers at 6%. Called *The Servicemember Student Loan Affordability Act*, it would fix a provision in federal law that unintentionally discourages members of the military from consolidating or refinancing pre-service student loans and taking full advantage of all student benefits and educational assistance available to Servicemembers. The legislation is supported by the American Legion, Association of United States Navy, the National Guard Association of the United States, the Retired Enlisted Association, Paralyzed

Veterans of America, Veteran Education Success, the Institute of College Access and Success, and the National Education Association. Duckworth and Durbin's amendment is co-sponsored by Senators Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) and Patty Murray (D-WA). When Duckworth helped introduce the bipartisan legislation earlier this year, she said **“Our servicemen and women are willing to give their lives for this country, and it is imperative that we support them in every way possible. This commonsense legislation will allow Servicemembers to take advantage of all the educational assistance available to them. I am proud to work with Senator Durbin to make higher education more affordable for our nation's heroes.”**

- **Help DOD & VA Develop A Fully Integrated Electronic Health Records System.** Duckworth's amendment would have required the Secretary of Defense to support the Secretary of the VA in the development and implementation of a fully integrated electronic health record system. Duckworth's amendment instructs both secretaries to pursue the development of an EHR that “achieves complete interoperability.” The amendment would have also required DOD & VA to jointly submit an annual report on the implementation's progress and costs allowing Congress to audit how the departments are moving towards achieving complete interoperability.
- **Help Address Need for STEM(MM) Jobs at Rock Island Arsenal.** Duckworth, along with Durbin, Grassley and Ernst, offered an amendment that would have helped address the need for STEM jobs at Rock Island's Joint Manufacturing and Technology Center by requiring the DOD Secretary to perform an assessment of the STEM(MM) science, technology, engineering, mathematics, maintenance and manufacturing) workforce at arsenals, depots and ammunition plants, including the numbers and types of positions and expectations of loss due to retirements and voluntary departures
- **Utilize Capabilities of Rock Island Arsenal for Large Manufacturing Projects.** Duckworth, along with Durbin, Grassley and Ernst, offered an amendment that would have helped strengthen the Arsenal's workload by requiring contracting officials to consider arsenals for manufacturing projects.

Senator Duckworth also co-sponsored a number of amendments including one that passed the Senate that will:

- **Protect Military Recruits With Vital Skills from Being Discharged & Deported Due To Immigration Status.** Under the Military Accessions Vital to National Interest (MAVNI) program, immigrants with skills that are vital to national security but underrepresented in the U.S. military are given the opportunity to enlist in the Armed Forces. This amendment will protect those MAVNI recruits from the government breaking its promise to them and having their enlistment contracts cancelled, placing them at risk for deportation, while they wait for the background

screening process to finish. There are an estimated 1,000 to 1,800 MAVNI recruits – including hundreds of DREAMers – who are currently waiting for the chance to serve our country and swear allegiance to the United States.