

Akaka Legislation Passes Senate

Military healthcare programs not protected yet

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WASHINGTON — The national commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. is saluting the U.S. Senate today for passing S. 3162 to explicitly recognize all Department of Veterans Affairs healthcare programs as meeting the minimum essential coverage standards of the new national healthcare law.

S. 3162 was introduced Wednesday by Senate VA Committee Chairman Daniel Akaka (D-Hawaii). The Bill now goes to the House of Representatives for action.

In separate legislation, S. 3148 was introduced by Senate Armed Services Personnel Subcommittee Chairman Jim Webb (D-Va.) as a companion bill to H.R. 4887, which was introduced by House Armed Services Committee Chairman Ike Skelton (D-Mo.) and approved last Saturday by a vote of 403-0. It would protect all military Tricare programs, as well as non-appropriated fund health plans. The VFW wants the Senate to vote on S. 3148 when it reconvenes after its upcoming two week recess.

“National healthcare will help many veterans who are currently not receiving DOD or VA care,” said Thomas J. Tradewell Sr., a combat-wounded Vietnam veteran from Sussex, Wis., “but missing from the original legislation was language that would clearly protect all military Tricare and VA healthcare programs. We hope that the healthcare programs provided by the nation's two largest federal departments will soon be protected as meeting the minimum essential coverage standards of the new law. America’s veterans, service members and families need to be assured that the VFW is committed to ensuring these vital programs are secured for them and that we will continue to advocate tirelessly on their behalf until the job is done.”

What prompted additional congressional action was not what the new healthcare bill provided, but what it did not. Buried in four lines of text in a 2,400-page document was recognition for only Tricare for Life and veterans’ healthcare programs just under chapter 17, of Title 38, as being accepted as minimum essential coverage under the new law. There was no mention of other Tricare programs or other Title 38 recipients, for instance —

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dependents, widows or children.

“Bill language is important because it becomes the law of the land,” said Tradewell. “I am extremely proud of Senator Akaka for his efforts and getting his bill passed, and for the efforts of Senator Webb, as well as Congressman Skelton for comprehending that the military Tricare program is too important not to include.”

"America's veterans, military and their families deserve strong champions in Congress like Akaka, Webb and Skelton, plus Senate VA Committee ranking member Richard Burr (R-N.C.), House VA Committee ranking member Steve Buyer (R-Ind.), and House Armed Services Committee ranking member Buck McKeon (R-Calif.).