

VA TRICARE Protection Promises Need Repeating

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WASHINGTON — The nation's largest and oldest major combat veterans' organization will be watching intently this Sunday when the House of Representatives meets to push through a national healthcare bill.

"We have been repeatedly promised by the president and by senior congressional leaders that the healthcare programs provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs and the military's Tricare system will remain intact," said Thomas J. Tradewell Sr., the national commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. and its Auxiliaries.

"Yet I remain worried because a free press and an even freer Internet continue to fuel speculation that both systems could be lost and/or absorbed into a larger national healthcare plan," said Tradewell, a combat-wounded Vietnam veteran from Sussex, Wis.

In congressional testimony March 9 before a joint hearing of the Senate and House Committees on Veterans Affairs, Tradewell told committee members that "America's veterans and military retirees look to you — our champions in Congress — to protect both programs, and to do so vocally at every opportunity."

Doing so today was Rep. Ike Skelton (D-Mo.), the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, who introduced H.R. 4887 to explicitly state in law that Tricare and other Defense Department nonappropriated fund health plans are protected from any health reforms currently under consideration by Congress.

"Our nation's military provides us with first-class protection, and it is our obligation to provide them — and their families — with first-class healthcare in return," said Skelton, who received the VFW's 2010 Congressional Award last week.

"Not knowing is what scares people who have worn the uniform," said Tradewell. "Now is the time for the president and the leadership to step up and reiterate their promises to protect the VA and Tricare systems."

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