

Separate Legislation Now Required to Protect VA, DOD Healthcare Programs

Mar 23, 2010

WASHINGTON — Millions of Americans are now covered by the new national healthcare law, but according to the national commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S., missing from the healthcare bill the president signed into law today was language to specifically protect the integrity and viability of the healthcare programs provided by the Departments of Veterans Affairs and Defense.

That means separate legislation introduced over the weekend is now required before America's veterans, service members and dependents can rest assured that their healthcare programs will be protected now and in the future.

"The VFW is not against national healthcare," said Thomas J. Tradewell Sr., a combat-wounded Vietnam veteran from Sussex, Wis. "Our sole interest in the entire debate is to ensure that the programs provided by VA and DOD were recognized and protected. All VFW ever asked for months was for the promises made to be written into the final bill. They were not."

A problem surfaced with the national healthcare bill late last week when House Armed Services Committee Chairman Ike Skelton (D-Mo.) introduced legislation to specifically protect all military Tricare programs. The 2,409-page national healthcare document contained only a five-word phrase (on page 333) that makes Tricare for Life accepted as minimum essential coverage. No other Tricare programs were mentioned, nor were DOD nonappropriated fund health plans.

Skelton's bill, H.R. 4887, was approved Saturday by a 403-0 vote, and a Senate companion bill has since been introduced by Sen. Jim Webb (D-Va.), who chairs the Senate Armed Services Personnel Subcommittee, and who is a key member of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee.

Another House bill, H.R. 4894, was introduced Saturday by Reps. Steve Buyer (R-Ind.) and Buck McKeon (R-Calif.) to protect Tricare as well as the healthcare programs and services provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs. Buyer is the ranking member of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, and McKeon is the ranking member of the House Armed

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Services Committee.

The Buyer/McKeon bill would help clear up ambiguities in a new law that currently only mentions veterans' healthcare programs under chapter 17, Title 38, as being accepted as minimum essential coverage. The problem, according to Tradewell, is the language only reads veterans — not dependents, widows and orphans who are also covered, for instance, under chapters 17 and 18.

“Bill language is important,” said Tradewell, “and that’s why the VFW remains adamant to expeditiously fixing the new law. All of DOD’s programs should have been in the original bill, as well as all of Title 38, not just part of one chapter. This isn’t playing politics; this is protecting the hard earned healthcare coverage our veterans, service members and their families deserve.”