

Comprehensive Support for Caregivers of Veterans of All Eras

Studies show caregivers improve patients' health, reduce hospital readmissions, and delay institutionalization, decreasing health care costs. However, caregivers often make personal sacrifices in terms of their own health and well-being by serving in this role.

A National Alliance for Caregiving study found the vast majority of caregivers of disabled veterans from all war eras reported increased stress or anxiety and sleep deprivation. The report shows declines in healthy behaviors of caregivers—such as exercising, eating habits and keeping their own medical appointments. Over half of the caregivers in the study had cut back their number of work hours and almost half stopped working or took early retirement, resulting in financial hardship.

Congress enacted Public Law 111-163, requiring the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to provide comprehensive caregiver assistance and services to family caregivers of severely injured veterans. DAV was instrumental in ensuring support services include caregiver education and training, respite care, mental health services, a monthly stipend, and enrollment in CHAMPVA for health care coverage. However; due to cost concerns, Congress limited participation in the program to veterans injured on or after September 11, 2001.

Preliminary data gathered since the program's implementation suggests VA's caregiver support program is effective, and mirrors other research on multi-component caregiver support, significantly lifting caregiver burden, reducing costly inpatient stays, and delaying nursing home admission.

Yet countless caregivers of veterans severely ill and injured from earlier wartime service are not eligible to participate. After a lifetime of caregiving, many family caregivers are aging and their capacity to continue in their role is declining. Although most family caregivers continue to willingly undertake this role, they require support and services to mitigate the negative physical, emotional, and financial consequences of caregiving.

In December, the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee approved S.425, the Veterans Homeless Programs, Caregiver Services and Other Improvements Act of 2015, which contains provisions that would phase-in the eligibility for VA's caregiver support program to severely injured veterans of *all* eras.

While similar measures have been introduced in the House—H.R.2894, the CARE for All Veterans Act, H.R.1969, the Military and Veteran Caregiver Services Improvement Act of 2015 and H.R.1899, the Caregivers Expansion and Improvement Act of 2015—none has yet been passed by the House Veterans' Affairs Committee.

- ***Congress should approve legislation to authorize comprehensive supports, benefits, and services to family caregivers of severely ill and injured veterans of all eras.***