



The Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act of 2014 Highlights

On August 8, 2014, President Obama signed the Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act of 2014 into law. As a member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, Senator Mazie K. Hirono was one of the negotiators who worked to develop the final bipartisan legislation which includes important provisions for Hawaii veterans.

Broadly, the legislation provides \$16.3 billion to the Veterans Administration (VA) in order to support the hiring of more health care professionals, invest in additional facilities and infrastructure, and to temporarily provide veterans with access to private health care providers. The law also provides the VA with the ability to hire health care professionals more quickly, and to ensure accountability among senior leadership.

The bill also includes important benefits specifically for Hawaii veterans:

- \$15,887,370 in authorized funds for the planned VA Advance Leeward Outpatient Healthcare Access Center on Oahu.
- Allows for healthcare contracts with the Native Hawaiian Health Care Systems, community health centers, and Department of Defense (DOD).
- Allows veterans who live 40 miles or more from a VA health facility and are unable to obtain an appointment within 30 days the option to see a private health care professional, including Medicare providers.
- An exception to the 40-mile rule for veterans who are required to travel by air, boat, or ferry to a VA medical facility. Many Hawaii veterans, who live within 40 miles from a VA medical center, overcome many obstacles and travel all day to receive care at a VA medical facility. This bill would offer them the choice to see a private health care provider within their community.
- Provides University of Hawaii veteran students the in-state tuition rate beginning in the 2015-16 academic year.

To improve access to and quality of care for veterans, the bill would:

Require VA to offer an authorization to receive non-VA care to any veteran who is enrolled in the VA health care system as of August 1, 2014, or who is a newly discharged combat veteran if such veteran is unable to secure an appointment at a VA medical facility within 30 days (or a future published goal established by VA) or resides more than 40 miles from the nearest VA medical facility, with certain exceptions. *(Implementation: 90 days after enactment of law)*

- Require VA to provide a Veterans Choice Card to eligible veterans to facilitate care provided by non-VA providers.

- Provide \$10 billion for the newly-established “Veterans Choice Fund” to cover the costs of this increased access to non-VA care. Choice program authority would end when funds are exhausted or three years after enactment, whichever occurs first.
- Require an independent assessment of VA medical care and establish a Congressional Commission on Care to evaluate access to care throughout the VA health care system.
- Extend the ARCH (Access Received Closer to Home) pilot program for two years.
- Extend for three years a pilot program to provide rehabilitation, quality of life, and community integration services to veterans with complex-mild to severe traumatic brain injury.
- Improve the delivery of care to veterans who have experienced military sexual trauma as well as care for Native Hawaiian and Native American veterans.

To expand VA’s internal capacity to provide timely care to veterans, the bill would:

- Provide \$5 billion to VA to increase access to care through the hiring of physicians and other medical staff and by improving VA’s physical infrastructure.
- Authorize 27 major medical facility leases in 18 states, including Hawaii, and Puerto Rico.

To provide real accountability for senior managers, the bill would:

- Authorize VA to fire or demote Senior Executive Service (SES) employees and equivalent employees for poor performance or misconduct.
 - ▶ Provide an expedited and limited appeal process for employees disciplined under this authority. Appeals would go to a Merit Systems Protection Board administrative judge, who would have 21 days to decide on the appeal. If a decision is not reached within that 21-day period, then VA’s decision to remove or demote the executive is final.
 - ▶ Prohibit SES employees from receiving pay, bonuses and benefits during the appeal process.
- Reduce funding for bonuses available to VA employees by \$40 million each year through FY 2024.

To improve education benefits for veterans and dependents, the bill would:

- Require public colleges to provide in-state tuition to veterans and eligible dependents in order for the school to remain eligible to receive G.I. Bill education payments. (*Effective Date: Quarter, semester, or term commencing on or after July 15, 2015*)
- Expand the Sgt. Fry Scholarship Program to provide full Post 9/11 G.I. Bill benefits to spouses of servicemembers who died in the line of duty after 9/11. (*Effective Date: Quarter, semester, or term commencing on or after January 1, 2015*)