

106<sup>TH</sup> CONGRESS  
2<sup>D</sup> SESSION

# H. R. 5552

To amend title 38, United States Code, to enhance outreach programs carried out by the Department of Veterans Affairs to provide for more fully informing surviving spouses and dependents of benefits available to them under laws administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and to improve local assistance levels by providing dedicated staff to assist surviving spouses and dependents in obtaining benefits under those laws.

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## IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

OCTOBER 25, 2000

Mr. DOYLE (for himself, Mr. EVANS, Mr. FILNER, Mr. MURTHA, Mr. BALDACCI, Mr. HOLDEN, Mr. BORSKI, Mr. LARSON, Mr. KANJORSKI, Mr. MASCARA, Mr. BRADY of Pennsylvania, Mr. FATTAH, Mr. FORBES, Mr. COYNE, Mr. KLINK, Mr. PASCRELL, Mr. BARCIA, Ms. BROWN of Florida, and Ms. DEGETTE) introduced the following bill; which was referred to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs

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## A BILL

To amend title 38, United States Code, to enhance outreach programs carried out by the Department of Veterans Affairs to provide for more fully informing surviving spouses and dependents of benefits available to them under laws administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and to improve local assistance levels by providing dedicated staff to assist surviving spouses and dependents in obtaining benefits under those laws.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*  
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

1 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

2 This Act may be cited as the “Surviving Spouses and  
3 Dependents Outreach Enhancement and Veterans Case-  
4 work Improvement Act”.

5 **SEC. 2. FINDINGS.**

6 Congress makes the following findings:

7 (1) There are over 600,000 surviving spouses  
8 and dependents receiving dependency and indemnity  
9 compensation (DIC) or death pensions from the De-  
10 partment of Veterans Affairs.

11 (2) The Department of Veterans Affairs does  
12 not target this population for specific outreach ef-  
13 forts, nor does it provide program outreach coordi-  
14 nators designated at each regional office of the De-  
15 partment to assist this population and other sur-  
16 vivors who may be eligible for benefits from the De-  
17 partment.

18 (3) Approximately 1,000 veterans die daily,  
19 many survived by widows and dependents who may  
20 not be fully informed as to their eligibility for bene-  
21 fits under laws administered by the Secretary of  
22 Veterans Affairs.

23 (4) There is no formal program for coordination  
24 of benefits for surviving spouses and dependents at  
25 any level within the Department of Veterans Affairs.

1           (5) Due to insufficient outreach efforts, infor-  
2           mational updates targeted specifically to surviving  
3           spouses and dependents are not provided. Outreach  
4           efforts to provide information concerning changes in  
5           service-connection for disabilities presumed associ-  
6           ated with exposure to herbicides and ionizing radi-  
7           ation and former prisoners of war have been insuffi-  
8           cient to adequately inform survivors of benefits to  
9           which they may now be entitled.

10 **SEC. 3. NATIONAL GOAL TO FULLY INFORM AND ASSIST**  
11                           **SURVIVING SPOUSES AND DEPENDENTS RE-**  
12                           **GARDING ELIGIBILITY FOR BENEFITS AND**  
13                           **HEALTH CARE SERVICES.**

14           (a) NATIONAL GOAL.—Congress hereby declares it to  
15           be a national goal to fully inform surviving spouses and  
16           dependents regarding their eligibility for benefits and  
17           health care services under laws administered by the Sec-  
18           retary of Veterans Affairs.

19           (b) COOPERATIVE EFFORTS ENCOURAGED.—Con-  
20           gress hereby encourages all elements within the Depart-  
21           ment of Veterans Affairs, private and public sector entities  
22           (including veterans service organizations), and veterans  
23           widows and surviving spouses organizations to work coop-  
24           eratively to fully inform the surviving spouses and depend-  
25           ents of veterans regarding their eligibility for benefits and

1 health care services under laws administered by the Sec-  
2 retary of Veterans Affairs.

3 **SEC. 4. REQUIREMENT FOR OUTREACH EFFORTS AND**  
4 **DEDICATED STAFF AT EACH REGIONAL OF-**  
5 **FICE.**

6 (a) FINDINGS.—Congress and the Department of  
7 Veterans Affairs have historically targeted certain specific  
8 populations for outreach efforts concerning benefits under  
9 laws administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs.  
10 Groups currently targeted for such outreach efforts and  
11 for which program outreach coordinators have been des-  
12 ignated at each regional office of the Department of Vet-  
13 erans Affairs are the following:

- 14 (1) Former prisoners of war.
- 15 (2) Women veterans.
- 16 (3) Minority veterans.
- 17 (4) Active duty personnel.
- 18 (5) Homeless veterans.
- 19 (6) Elderly veterans.
- 20 (7) Recently separated veterans.

21 (b) ELIGIBLE DEPENDENT DEFINED.—Paragraph  
22 (2) of section 7721(b) of title 38, United States Code, is  
23 amended to read as follows:

24 “(2) the term ‘eligible dependent’ means a  
25 spouse, surviving spouse (whether or not remarried),

1 child (regardless of age or marital status), or parent  
2 of a person who served in the active military, naval,  
3 or air service.”.

4 (c) IMPROVED OUTREACH PROGRAM.—(1) Sub-  
5 chapter II of chapter 77 of title 38, United States Code,  
6 is amended by adding at the end the following new section:

7 **“§ 7727. Outreach for eligible dependents**

8 “(a) In carrying out this subchapter, the Secretary  
9 shall ensure that the needs of eligible dependents are fully  
10 addressed.

11 “(b)(1) In order to carry out subsection (a), the Sec-  
12 retary shall assign such employees of the Veterans Bene-  
13 fits Administration as the Secretary considers appropriate  
14 to conduct outreach programs and provide outreach serv-  
15 ices for eligible dependents. In areas where the number  
16 of eligible dependents warrant doing so, the Secretary  
17 shall assign at least one employee in the Veterans Benefits  
18 Administration regional office to serve as a full-time coor-  
19 dinator of outreach programs and services for eligible de-  
20 pendants in that region.

21 “(2) Responsibilities of employees assigned to out-  
22 reach functions under paragraph (1) shall include pro-  
23 viding eligible dependents with information about benefits  
24 under laws administered by the Secretary and with assist-  
25 ance in claims preparation and inquiry resolution.

1           “(c) Whenever an eligible dependent first applies for  
2 any benefit under laws administered by the Secretary, the  
3 Secretary shall provide to the dependent information con-  
4 cerning eligibility for benefits and health care services  
5 under programs administered by the Secretary. For pur-  
6 poses of this paragraph, a request for burial or related  
7 benefits, including an application for life insurance pro-  
8 ceeds, shall be treated by the Secretary as an initial appli-  
9 cation for benefits.

10           “(d)(1) Information provided an eligible dependent  
11 under this section shall include information on how to  
12 apply for benefits for which the dependent may be eligible,  
13 including information about assistance available under  
14 subsection (b) and section 7722(d) of this title.

15           “(2) In the case of eligible dependents who are mem-  
16 bers of distinct beneficiary populations (such as survivors  
17 of veterans), the Secretary shall ensure that information  
18 provided under this section includes specific information  
19 about benefits relating to that population.

20           “(e) For any area in which there is a significant pop-  
21 ulation of eligible dependents whose primary language is  
22 a language other than English, the Secretary shall make  
23 information provided under this subsection available to  
24 those dependents in the dominant language in that area  
25 (in addition to English).

1           “(f) Outreach services and assistance shall be pro-  
2 vided for eligible dependents through the same means that  
3 are used for other specially targeted groups.

4           “(g) The Secretary shall ensure that the availability  
5 of outreach services and assistance for eligible dependents  
6 under this subchapter is made known through a variety  
7 of means, including the Internet, correspondence of the  
8 Department, announcements in veterans publications, di-  
9 rect correspondence to congressional offices, military bases  
10 public affairs offices, military retiree affairs offices, and  
11 United States embassies.

12           “(h) The Secretary shall support the Department’s  
13 periodic evaluation under section 527 of this title con-  
14 cerning the Department’s efforts to address the needs of  
15 eligible dependents.

16           “(i) The Secretary shall submit to Congress an an-  
17 nual report on the programs of the Department address-  
18 ing the information and assistance needs of eligible de-  
19 pendants. The Secretary shall include in each such report  
20 the following:

21                   “(1) Information about expenditures, costs, and  
22 workload under the program of the Department di-  
23 rected towards the information and assistance needs  
24 of eligible dependents.

1           “(2) Information about outreach efforts di-  
2           rected toward eligible dependents.

3           “(3) Information about emerging needs within  
4           the program that relate to other provisions of law,  
5           including section 7725 of this title with respect to  
6           language needs of eligible dependents.

7           “(4) Information as to the timeline for imple-  
8           mentation of improvements to meet existing and  
9           emerging needs of eligible dependents in addition to  
10          those specified in this section.”.

11          (2) The table of sections at the beginning of such  
12          chapter is amended by inserting after the item relating  
13          to section 7726 the following new item:

“7727. Outreach for eligible dependents.”.

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