

# A Moment of Bipartisanship for Veterans and Military Families

by Todd Smith, Steve Gordon, & Jesse Weathington | May 21, 2018 | The Forum | 0 comments



These days it is difficult to find bipartisan agreement on big issues. However, supporting our veterans and military families is an issue which tends to bring the political realm together at all levels – federal, state and local. Last week, Congress and the Trump Administration took great strides in providing that support.

The House of Representatives passed S. 2372, the VA MISSION Act of 2018 by a vote of 347-70. This legislation would fundamentally transform elements of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) healthcare system and fulfill the President's commitment to provide veterans with more choice in their healthcare providers. This legislation is the product of discussions between the President, the Department of Veterans Affairs and Congressional leaders. It is expected to be passed by the Senate and signed into law by President Trump in the coming weeks.

Key among those Congressional leaders was Georgia's own Senator Johnny Isakson. As Chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Senator Isakson played a major role in putting this legislation together and gathering support for it. In fact, the VA MISSION Act builds on legislation previously introduced by him. In response to the

House passage of S. 2372, Senator Isakson stated, "This bicameral, bipartisan legislation is truly a testament to what can be accomplished when Congress works together. These reforms are some of the most significant changes proposed to-date to improve the VA's current healthcare delivery system to help provide veterans with more choice and fewer barriers to care...".

In short, S. 2372, the VA MISSION Act would establish a permanent, streamlined 'Veterans Community Care Program' to provide veterans with access to health care and services in their own communities. It funds the existing Veterans Choice program to ensure veterans continue to receive care through the Choice program until the new Veterans Community Care Program takes effect. In addition, the legislation will help improve existing VA health care and services by removing barriers for VA healthcare professionals to practice telemedicine, strengthening processes for opioid prescribing by VA and community care providers, and eliminating impediments to hiring and retention of VA healthcare professionals. The VA MISSION Act also expands eligibility for the VA's Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers to veterans of all generations.

Also, this past week, President Trump issued an executive order to enhance opportunities for military spouses looking for employment in the federal government. The purpose of the President's order is to provide significantly greater opportunity for military spouses to be considered for federal competitive service positions.

Specifically, the executive order requires federal agencies to promote the use of noncompetitive hiring authority that currently exists for military spouses to the greatest extent possible; directs the Office of Personnel Management to educate agencies regarding the use of the noncompetitive hiring authority, and to increase awareness of the opportunities it creates among military spouses; requires all agencies to report annually on their progress in advertising positions to, obtaining applications from, and hiring military spouses; and, directs agencies to recommend new ways to improve license portability and remove barriers to the employment of military spouses.

As mentioned earlier, supporting our veterans and military families is an issue which brings all political realms together. Indeed, Georgia's state leaders have stepped up to the plate, as well. This year Governor Deal and the General Assembly created the Georgia Joint Defense Commission to create solutions meant to enhance relationships between the military and the community in military-dependent communities. This effort also provides for a grant that is based on developing these relationships and furthering military installations' economic impact into the community. Another effort,

HB 700, allows anyone in the Georgia National Guard enrolled in a graduate degree program to apply for a service cancelable loan depending on their program's eligibility. And, just last year, a couple of bills were signed into state law which requires a women's veteran's office to help with recruiting and training mentors, while another new law established a process by which military spouses may qualify for temporary certificates.

Yes, we have Veterans' Day and Memorial Day to celebrate our veterans, the fallen, and those currently in uniform. However, it is good to know that our leaders are looking after them on the days in between. After all, they have and do look out for us every day.

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## Handel speaks at opioid summit



**U.S. Rep. Karen Handel** may be in the midst of a contested re-election campaign, but she still has time to confront a major issue in Georgia – the opioid epidemic. Handel last week helped convene the Opioid Summit at Dunwoody City Hall, an event created to help the district understand and better treat an issue that has caused great harm to thousands. For Handel, being at the forefront of the fight against opioid addiction has her ship **RISING...**