

Automatic VA enrollment bill gains support

By Rick Maze - Staff writer

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A bill to automatically enroll returning combat veterans in the veterans health care system is gaining some key support.

The nation's largest veterans service organization, the American Legion, has endorsed the bill, HR 3441, as has Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, founded in 2004 specifically to look out for the interests of people who served in Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom.

Also on board are Reps. Bob Filner, D-Calif., the House Veterans' Affairs Committee chairman, and Patrick Murphy, D-Pa., the first Iraq veteran elected to Congress, who is now a member of the House Armed Services Committee.

The chief sponsor of the bill, Rep. Michael Arcuri, D-N.Y., told the House Veterans' Affairs Committee's health panel Thursday that he hopes automatic enrollment would smooth the transition between the military and veterans health care systems by putting a VA identification card and a list of all VA medical facilities within a 180-mile radius into the hands of combat veterans as they leave the military.

Combat veterans already are promised five years of post-service treatment at VA facilities without having to prove a direct service connection for their ailments, injuries or disease. But Arcuri said automatic enrollment would eliminate some problems and get veterans accepted into the VA "as soon as possible," while also ensuring everyone is aware of the care that's available.

Joseph Wilson of the 2.5-million member American Legion, testifying at the same hearing as Arcuri, said a combat veteran and the veteran's family can easily be overwhelmed with information and miss out on VA health care enrollment.

Because of that confusion, veterans "may reject enrollment and perhaps slip through the cracks during and after their transition," Wilson said.

Blake Ortner of Paralyzed Veterans of American raised the same point. "During the hectic activities of discharge, many military members leaving active duty may not consider the importance of enrolling in VA," Ortner said. "They may not think it is important if they have already identified employment that will provide health care benefits."

The one change Ortner said is needed is a clarification on National Guard and reserve members who serve in combat but are not discharged from service. They also would be enrolled in the VA program, he said.

"They are no less deserving of automatic enrollment — and it may be even more important, as they do not have the long period of preparation often afforded to those being discharged from active service," Ortner said.

The House Veterans' Affairs Committee has heard complaints that Guard and reserve members may have a harder time than separated active-duty service members in receiving VA health care, especially mental health services, because they lack the discharge papers commonly used by VA to prove eligibility.

VA officials have tried to rectify that by clarifying eligibility procedures, but possession of a VA identification card upon demobilization would resolve some of those difficulties, committee aides said.