

military personnel receiving information from the Federal Voting Assistance Program. A survey conducted recently by the Inspector General for the Department of Defense analyzed the effectiveness of the Federal Voting Assistance Program during the 2006 general election and found that only 40 percent of members of the Armed Forces received voting information from the military and only 33 percent were aware of the Federal Post Card Application.

We must ensure that the Federal Voting Assistance Program improves their communication efforts and promotes the Federal Post Card Application and the Federal Write-in Absentee Ballot so that our service men and women are aware of the resources available to them during an election.

This year, perhaps more than any other year in recent memory, our Nation's electorate is excited to cast their ballots for the candidates of their choosing. For those serving their country overseas, and for civilians living abroad, we must do everything in our power to ensure that they have the information necessary to do so.

Mr. Speaker, I yield back the balance of my time.

Mrs. DAVIS of California. Mr. Speaker, I have no further speakers, and I yield back the balance of my time.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The question is on the motion offered by the gentlewoman from California (Mrs. DAVIS) that the House suspend the rules and agree to the concurrent resolution, H. Con. Res. 388, as amended.

The question was taken; and (two-thirds being in the affirmative) the rules were suspended and the concurrent resolution, as amended, was agreed to.

The title was amended so as to read: "Concurrent resolution expressing the sense of Congress that the Department of Defense and the Federal Voting Assistance Program should take certain additional and timely measures to ensure that members of the Armed Forces and their dependents and citizens living overseas are provided with reasonable information on how to register to vote and vote in the 2008 general elections."

A motion to reconsider was laid on the table.

VETERAN VOTING SUPPORT ACT

Mrs. DAVIS of California. Mr. Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and pass the bill (H.R. 6625) to require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to permit facilities of the Department of Veterans Affairs to be designated as voter registration agencies, and for other purposes, as amended.

The Clerk read the title of the bill.

The text of the bill is as follows:

H.R. 6625

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.

This Act may be cited as the "Veteran Voting Support Act".

SEC. 2. FINDINGS.

Congress makes the following findings:

(1) Veterans serving in foreign wars have performed a great service to, and risked the greatest sacrifice in the name of, our country, and should be supported by the people and the Government of the United States.

(2) Veterans are especially qualified to understand issues of war, foreign policy, and government support for veterans, and they should have the opportunity to voice that understanding through voting.

(3) The Department of Veterans Affairs should assist veterans in meeting their medical, social, and civic needs, including the full participation of veterans in our democracy.

(4) The Department of Veterans Affairs should make every effort to assist veterans to register to vote and to vote.

SEC. 3. USE OF DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS FACILITIES AS VOTER REGISTRATION AGENCIES.

The Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall permit a State to designate facilities of the Department of Veterans Affairs located in such State as voter registration agencies under section 7 of the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (42 U.S.C. 1973gg-5) solely for the purposes of providing voter registration services under such section to individuals receiving services or assistance from the facility (or applying to receive services or assistance from the facility).

SEC. 4. ASSISTANCE WITH ABSENTEE BALLOTS.

In addition to the services required to be provided under section 7 of the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (42 U.S.C. 1973gg-5), any facility of the Department of Veterans Affairs which is designated as a voter registration agency under section 3 shall, with respect to the individuals for whom the facility is required to provide such services—

(1) provide information relating to the opportunity to request an absentee ballot;

(2) make available absentee ballot applications and, upon request, assistance in completing such applications and absentee ballots, except that nothing in this paragraph may be construed to waive any requirement under State or local law regarding an individual's eligibility to receive an absentee ballot or vote by absentee ballot in any election; and

(3) work with local election officials to ensure the proper delivery of absentee ballot applications and absentee ballots.

SEC. 5. INFORMATION PROVIDED BY NON-PARTISAN ORGANIZATIONS.

The Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall permit a meaningful opportunity, including reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions, for nonpartisan organizations to provide voter registration information and assistance at facilities of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

SEC. 6. ASSISTANCE PROVIDED BY ELECTION OFFICIALS AT DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS FACILITIES.

(a) DISTRIBUTION OF INFORMATION.—

(1) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall not prohibit any election administration official, whether State or local, party-affiliated or non-party affiliated, or elected or appointed, from providing voting information to veterans at any facility of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

(2) VOTING INFORMATION.—In this subsection, the term "voting information" means nonpartisan information intended for the public about voting, including information about voter registration, voting systems, absentee balloting, polling locations, and other important resources for voters.

(b) VOTER REGISTRATION SERVICES.—The Secretary shall provide reasonable access to

facilities of the Department of Veterans Affairs to State and local election officials for the purpose of providing nonpartisan voter registration services to individuals.

(c) COORDINATION TO MINIMIZE DISRUPTION OF REGULAR ACTIVITIES.—Any election official providing nonpartisan voting information or nonpartisan voter registration services under this section at a facility of the Department of Veterans Affairs shall coordinate the provision of the information or services with the Secretary to ensure that the information or services are provided in a manner which minimizes the disruption of the regular activities of the facility.

SEC. 7. ANNUAL REPORT ON COMPLIANCE.

The Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall submit to Congress an annual report on how the Secretary has complied with the requirements of this Act.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the rule, the gentlewoman from California (Mrs. DAVIS) and the gentleman from California (Mr. MCCARTHY) each will control 20 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentlewoman from California.

GENERAL LEAVE

Mrs. DAVIS of California. Mr. Speaker I ask unanimous consent that all Members may have 5 legislative days to revise and extend their remarks in the RECORD.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentlewoman from California?

There was no objection.

Mrs. DAVIS of California. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself as much time as I may consume.

H.R. 6625 will make certain that the Secretary of Veterans Affairs provides the voting assistance and opportunities that our veterans deserve.

H.R. 6625 responds to a Department of Veterans Affairs voting assistance policy established in May, which was misguided and unacceptable. The VA directive permitted voting assistance only if requested. It prohibited election officials and nonpartisan organizations from providing assistance to our veterans at VA facilities. Despite the policy changes made by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs last week, the policy still doesn't offer the meaningful voter registration and voting assistance our veterans deserve.

H.R. 6625 will require the VA to assist our veterans by permitting States to designate VA facilities as voter registration agencies under section 7 of the National Voter Registration Act. In addition, the bill would prohibit the VA from banning State and local election officials and nonpartisan groups from distributing nonpartisan information about voting and providing voter assistance at VA facilities.

Voter registration drives conducted by these election experts have energized millions of voters who historically have not participated in elections. H.R. 6625 requires that nonpartisan groups with the expertise and experience be allowed to assist veterans with the voting process with minimal disruption to facility operations.

My district in San Diego is home to a large concentration of veterans. I

know that the future of our country matters so much to them, and they want to be involved. Certainly, the veterans who have fought and suffered to protect our democracy should be given every opportunity to vote.

Much has been said about the importance of this bill for voter registration, but I'd like to draw your attention to section 4 because it may be the most important part.

Section 4 provides veterans with assistance in voting by absentee ballot, also called voting by mail. It requires that absentee request forms be available in VA facilities and ensures that veterans can get help completing their absentee materials and returning them to the elections office.

Why is this so important? Not only does voting by mail save voters what can be a difficult trip to the polls, but it allows them more time to study their choices. For veterans, having time to vote without the pressure of a line of people behind them is especially helpful because many are voting in new jurisdictions where candidates and issues may not be familiar to them. Further, some of their illnesses or injuries mean they need additional time to mark their choices.

Unfortunately, voting absentee is not as straightforward a process as it should be in many places. State rules vary widely about who can vote absentee and how. Some States have forms with plenty of fine print, others require a formal letter just to request an absentee ballot, and some States even insist on doctors' notes or notary signatures. And of course, different States have a range of deadlines that must be met.

To make sure that votes count, some veterans could really use assistance navigating this overly complex process. I am pleased that our committee passed my legislation to lift some of the restrictions on voting by mail, and it is my sincere hope that we will make voting absentee more doable for everyone.

In the meantime, the least we can do for our brave veterans is to give them a little help with their absentee ballots.

I want to thank Mr. EHLERS for working with the committee to draft language that guarantees our veterans will always receive the voter assistance they need. I would also like to thank the 54 colleagues who have joined Mr. BRADY and me to introduce this legislation and especially applaud the dedication and work that Representatives FILNER and WATSON have shown on this issue.

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Our veterans have dedicated their lives to protecting our democracy and our government and we should be dedicated to ensuring veterans that they are given every opportunity to vote and participate in the very democracy they defend.

I urge all Members to support this legislation.

I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. MCCARTHY of California. Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of H.R. 6625 which would permit facilities of the Department of Veterans Affairs to be designated as voter registration agencies.

As I have stated in the past, it is important that we ensure that every vote is counted and that every citizen is able to cast a ballot. As a part of that effort, I'm pleased to join in support of this bill which would designate veteran facilities as voter registration agencies. Doing so will allow those who have risked their lives for our freedom an opportunity to register to vote and make their voices heard.

I am also pleased that Chairman BRADY addressed our chief concern with the original version of the bill, that the desire to facilitate the voting process for patients does not supersede patient care due to intrusion by third party groups in VA facilities. This bill's original language stated that nonpartisan groups would have "reasonable access" to veterans in order to encourage voter registration. The word "reasonable" means different things to different people, and we would hate to see a veteran who wishes to convalesce in a private setting be intruded upon by activists from a voter registration group, however well intended they may be. Also, some patients may choose not to cast a ballot, and they should not feel pressured to do so.

Language was added to this bill that stipulates that third party groups must work with the administrator of each VA facility to ensure their efforts will not infringe upon a patient's right to privacy and that their practices would not in any way disturb patients' recovery.

Implementing this provision will require a commitment of time and personnel from the Veterans Administration. It is my sincere hope that in acting as a liaison between their patients and outside groups, the VA will not siphon off precious time and resources intended to improve patient care.

Also, while the intention of this program is to ensure that our Nation's veterans are more easily able to cast a vote, the passage of the bill should not be taken as an invitation to disregard the absentee voting programs implemented at the State level in favor of turning Federal, State, or NVRA designated agencies into voting locations.

Veterans also require months of care as a result of their injuries and have limited mobility during that time. This bill was crafted with their unique circumstances in mind, and it is not intended to be a gateway to similar programs at other agencies. When it comes to establishing voting locations outside of each State's established protocols, this bill should be considered the exception, not the rule.

Again, I would like to thank Chairman BRADY for his leadership on this issue and his commitment to improving this bill in a bipartisan fashion.

I reserve the balance of my time.

Mrs. DAVIS of California. Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to yield 4 minutes to Representative WATSON of California.

Ms. WATSON. Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of H.R. 6625, the Veteran Voting Support Act.

In May of 2008, the Department of Veterans Affairs passed Directive 2008-25 that prohibited third party nonpartisan voting rights groups from holding voter registration drives on VA grounds. Outraged by this stance that the VA had taken, I, along with 54 of my colleagues, including Chairman BRADY and Chairman FILNER, sent two letters to VA Secretary James Peake requesting he overturn the policy.

As we returned from the August recess, on September 9, 2008, the VA passed a new policy directive, 2008-53. The new directive now allows State and local election officials and nonpartisan groups to give veterans access to their fundamental right to vote. We applaud the VA for overturning its previous directive, and I believe it is a step in the right direction. But the new policy still falls short of providing veterans complete access to voting in VA facilities. So H.R. 6625 will fix that problem.

The Veteran Voting Support Act would designate VA facilities as voter registration agencies under section 7 of the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 which requires public assistance organizations provide voter registration opportunities by offering information related to requesting an absentee ballot, making absentee ballot applications available, and require the VA to work with elected officials to ensure the delivery of absentee applications and absentee ballots.

Currently, our Nation is fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and as a consequence, our veterans are returning home with catastrophic injuries that require them to reside in a VA facility for extended periods of time to receive treatment for their wounds. This is why it is absolutely imperative that we give the selfless stewards of the Constitution complete access to voting in our elections. It is because of the sacrifice of men and women in the Armed Forces why we are free.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank Chairman BRADY and Chairman FILNER for working with me on the legislation, and I urge my colleagues to support H.R. 6625.

Ms. ZOE LOFGREN. Mr. Speaker, I rise in support of H.R. 6625 and commend Chairman BRADY for introducing this important piece of legislation, the Veterans Voting Support Act of which I am an original cosponsor.

This legislation is significant to me because the issue of registering veterans to vote was born out of concern by one of my constituents, Steve Preminger. Steve went to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) nursing home in Menlo Park, CA to register veterans. Almost immediately, VA officials threw him out. The VA has since explained that its decision to evict Preminger was part of a policy that bars outside groups from registering voters who live

in VA nursing homes, hospitals, and transitional housing for homeless veterans. For the past four years Mr. Preminger has litigated to ensure that all veterans living on VA property have access to voter registration.

I applaud the VA for its recent change in policy allowing state and local election officials and non-partisan groups to access VA facilities to assist officials in registering veteran voters who are receiving care. But issuing a new policy is not enough and I question the agencies commitment to it. Last Friday, September 12, 2008, the San Francisco VA prohibited Veterans for Peace ("VFP"), a 501(c)(3), from registering voters, even though the "directive" instructs local officials to "facilitate" nonpartisan groups who wish to register voters.

As Paul Sullivan of Veterans for Common Sense stated in his testimony yesterday before the Senate Committee on Rules, "The VA has changed their policy on veteran voting rights three times in the past five months. VA can easily reverse course again and issue yet another policy banning voting assistance for veterans living in VA facilities."

I support this legislation, but am concerned that the protection for "nonpartisan" activities may create the inference that a government agency can regulate private "partisan" conversations just because they are on federal property, even though there is no apparent government sponsorship.

Over 5.3 million veterans (23.2 percent of all veterans) were not registered to vote in 2006. Veterans have dedicated their lives to protecting our country and deserve every commitment from the government to offer them the opportunity to participate in the political process. With November rapidly approaching it is imperative that we act both swiftly and vigilantly in passing H.R. 6625.

Mr. SCOTT of Virginia. Mr. Speaker. I rise in support of H.R. 6625, the Veterans Voting Support Act, which contains several provisions to help Veterans as they participate in the political process. First, it will require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to allow States to designate V.A. facilities as voter registration agencies. The bill will also require V.A. facilities to provide information and assist election officials to ensure proper delivery of voting material. Additional, the bill prohibits the Secretary of Veterans Affairs from restricting non-partisan organizations and state election organizations from providing information at V.A. facilities. This bill will help to prevent Department of Veterans Affairs policies from withholding information from Veterans on voter registration and voting.

The Department of Veterans Affairs previously adopted a policy that prohibits voter registration drives on V.A. grounds. The Department of Veterans Affairs recently changed that policy and now allows state and local election officials as well as non-partisan organizations to provide veterans help. However, the language of the policy still allows individual V.A. facilities to restrict access to these groups. This legislation will guarantee that individuals and organizations with the appropriate knowledge are given the right to assist our veterans in the voting registration process.

Our veterans have dedicated their lives to our country's safety and deserve the opportunity to be assisted in the political process. Given that many of our veterans are disabled or ill with special assistance needs as a result

of their service to our country, we should make every possible accommodation to provide them with the assistance they need to take a part in the political process and have their voices heard. It would be ironic for those fighting for our freedom and ability to participate in our democracy to themselves be denied the ability to participate.

I commend Rep. BRADY, the gentleman from Pennsylvania, for his hard work on this bill and urge my colleagues to support it.

Mr. MURPHY of Connecticut. Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my friend Chairman BRADY for bringing this legislation to the floor today, and for his work to ensure that our veterans are full and able participants in our democracy.

As you know, Mr. Speaker, last week, the VA revised its wrongheaded directive barring nonpartisan voter registration drives at VA facilities. Clearly, the VA felt the overwhelming bipartisan pressure from local, state and federal members who supported this legislation, as well as the Secretaries of State and countless veterans throughout the country who rightfully decried it. We have asked enormous sacrifices of our men and women in uniform, and it is simply unconscionable to deny them the right to participate in a government for which they have so valiantly served and fought for.

However, our presence here today attests to the fact that this fight is not yet over—while the VA has acted wisely in withdrawing their directive, they still retain the ability to reinstate it at some future date. The VA's recent policy shifts on voting registration have been sudden and unpredictable, and there is precious little assurance that they will not undergo another change of heart.

That is why I am a strong supporter of H.R. 6625. I have been to Connecticut's VA Hospitals and clinics, and I have seen and spoken with the generations of proud veterans those facilities care for and serve. They want to be able to enjoy the freedoms they worked to defend, and they deserve to be able to do so at VA facilities. Connecticut's Governor, Secretary of State, and Attorney General have joined this fight and support the legislation before us because they know our veterans' rights should not just be protected today, but for generations to come as well.

Not only will H.R. 6625 guarantee the right of veterans to register to vote at VA facilities, but the bill will also limit restrictions and expand access for nonpartisan voter drives and ensure that veterans get the assistance they need to complete the voter registration process. In an election year such as this, it's important that veterans, with their unique experience in serving their country, have their voices heard.

I urge my colleagues to support this bill and stand up for our veterans.

Mr. MCCARTHY of California. Mr. Speaker, I have no further speakers, and I yield back the balance of my time.

Mrs. DAVIS of California. Mr. Speaker, I urge passage of the legislation, and I yield back the balance of my time.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The question is on the motion offered by the gentlewoman from California (Mrs. DAVIS) that the House suspend the rules and pass the bill, H.R. 6625, as amended.

The question was taken; and (two-thirds being in the affirmative) the rules were suspended and the bill, as amended, was passed.

A motion to reconsider was laid on the table.

SENSE OF CONGRESS REGARDING LOWERING FLAG OVER CAPITOL TO HONOR MILITARY DEATHS

Mrs. DAVIS of California. Mr. Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and agree to the concurrent resolution (H. Con. Res. 61) expressing the sense of the Congress that the United States flag flown over the United States Capitol should be lowered to half-mast one day each month in honor of the brave men and women from the United States who have lost their lives in military conflicts.

The Clerk read the title of the concurrent resolution.

The text of the concurrent resolution is as follows:

H. CON. RES. 61

Whereas more than 1,000,000 brave men and women from the United States have died in military conflicts from the time of the Revolutionary War through Operation Iraqi Freedom;

Whereas the people of the United States mourn the loss of the brave men and women who have given their lives for this country;

Whereas the United States has not forgotten the sacrifices that brave men and women have made to protect our Nation and our freedom; and

Whereas paying tribute to the brave men and women from the United States who gave their lives for this Nation demonstrates the spirit of patriotism that is the foundation of our great country: Now, therefore, be it

Resolved by the House of Representatives (the Senate concurring), That it is the sense of the Congress that the United States flag flown over the United States Capitol should be lowered to half-mast one day each month in honor of the brave men and women from the United States who have lost their lives in military conflicts.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the rule, the gentlewoman from California (Mrs. DAVIS) and the gentleman from California (Mr. MCCARTHY) each will control 20 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentlewoman from California.

GENERAL LEAVE

Mrs. DAVIS of California. Mr. Speaker, I ask that all Members have 5 legislative days to revise and extend their remarks in the RECORD on this resolution.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentlewoman from California?

There was no objection.

Mrs. DAVIS of California. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

This resolution recognizes our servicemen and -women who have fought and died for our country and the sacrifice made by their families. The resolution provides for the flag over the Capitol to be raised at half-staff once a month in honor of all the U.S. men and women that have made the ultimate sacrifice in the service of our Nation.