



# UNITED STATES SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

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## *The Veterans First Act:*

### **Expanding and Strengthening VA's Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers**

This bill responsibly expands eligibility in two phases to ensure timely and effective services for veterans and caregivers.

#### **Timeline for expansion of the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers to all eras of veterans:**

- Prior to the program being expanded to pre-9/11 veterans, the Secretary must submit certification to Congress that a new information technology (IT) system to support the program has been fully implemented.
- The Veterans First Act requires that the IT system be implemented by December 31, 2016.
- Following implementation, VA must submit its certification to Congress by December 31, 2017, along with a report on how the system has been implemented and how the program has been modified.
- The expansion itself will occur in two phases:
  - During the two year period after the Secretary submits the certification, veterans who served on or before May 7, 1975 become eligible.
  - Two years after the certification date, veterans who served after May 7, 1975 and before September 11, 2001 become eligible. At this point, there is **no restriction on date of service** and there is not a requirement for additional action by Congress in order for the expansion to proceed after the Secretary's certification. ALL ERAS of veterans would be eligible.

#### **Additional provisions:**

- Provides family caregivers with financial planning services and legal services.
- Requires the VA to implement improvements to the caregivers program, as recommended by the Government Accountability Office (GAO), including implementing an IT system that supports the program, utilizing the system to assess the program, and identifying and implementing changes to ensure veterans and caregivers are receiving services in a timely manner.
- Includes reporting requirements to monitor VA's progress in implementing modifications and in preparing for a successful expansion of the program. In addition, GAO would review VA's progress.
- Establishes a VA Advisory Committee on Caregiver policy to evaluate the program and requires the VA to contract with an independent entity to conduct a comprehensive study on veterans and caregivers.

These provisions are derived from Senator Patty Murray's *Military and Veterans Caregiver Services Improvement Act of 2015*.