

Written Testimony for the Record
Senate Veterans Affairs Committee
S.2646 the Veterans Choice Improvement Act of 2016
Senator Steve Daines (MT)
March 15, 2016

Chairman Isakson, Ranking member Blumenthal and Members of the Committee;

Thank you for allowing me to submit testimony on the importance of the Veterans Choice Improvement Act of 2016, S.2646, introduced last week by Senator Burr, myself, and five other Senators. Issues with the Choice Act are the top concerns I hear from veterans in my home state of Montana and I am extremely pleased to see that our legislation designed to fix it has been brought before the committee today.

Our legislation seeks to improve the Choice Act passed in 2014 by creating one easy to understand program that allows veterans to get care outside the VA. It was clear that the redundant and bureaucratic layers of programs previously provided to our veterans was failing them, and failing local medical providers throughout the country.

In Montana, we started seeing providers pull out of the Choice Act because they were not being paid back. This created a chain reaction of more problems for veterans, who found themselves traveling past multiple qualified doctors to get to one that was accepting the VA's horrific track record of reimbursements. Furthermore, veterans started seeing their own credit history being impacted due to failed payments. By holding the VA accountable for reimbursements and setting strict time standards, our bill fixes this. S.2646 ensures providers outside the VA want to enter into these partnerships and blocks them from the painful regulations that come with being labeled a federal contractor.

Additionally, one of the key parts to the Veterans Choice Improvement Act is that it is the best suited for veterans in rural areas. Montana is home to one of the original pilot programs for veterans' healthcare in rural communities, the Access Received Closer to Home (ARCH) program – which is now incorporated and made permanent with S.2646. ARCH works to find healthcare in small local communities for veterans, and is a program that could be negatively impacted if the VA is allowed to enter into the “tiered network.” A tiered network would restrict a veteran's ability to choose among providers, and is something our legislation strictly prohibits.

Ensuring veterans can get the best care possible, close to home and without delay is of the utmost importance as we see our servicemembers return home. In Montana, where we are home to the second most veterans per capita, it is a top priority. The Veterans Choice Improvement Act takes drastic steps to ensure our veterans are getting the top care possible, and I am proud to submit this testimony today in support of it.