

# U.S. Sen. Baldwin: Bipartisan Veterans Health Care Reforms Pass the Senate

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*Baldwin's reforms strengthen opioid therapy safety and provide safer care for our veterans*

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Today, U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin's bipartisan reforms passed the Senate as part of the *VA MISSION Act of 2018* and will improve care for millions of veterans in Wisconsin and across the country.

The bipartisan, bicameral *VA MISSION Act* is a major reform that establishes a new community health care program with a streamlined set of rules that places a veteran and their doctor at the center of health care decisions. It strengthens the VA by addressing workforce shortages that prevent veterans from accessing timely care, and ensures that caregivers of all generations who put their careers and lives on hold to care for veterans can get the support they need. The House version passed last week and it now heads to the President's desk to be signed into law.

“Our veterans and their families deserve solutions to problems at the VA and I am proud to have worked across party lines to pass bipartisan VA reforms to make sure our nation's veterans get the care they need,” **said Senator Baldwin.** “Today the Senate took an important step forward in helping give every veteran access to the same safe, quality health care regardless of where they seek services. I'm proud to see these bipartisan reforms move one step closer to being signed into law by the President.”

The *VA MISSION Act* strengthens VA health care by removing barriers for veterans to access mental telehealth care; incentivizes medical residents and providers to work at rural, tribal and underserved VA facilities; and provides greater recruitment, retention and relocation incentives so that VA can attract and maintain high-quality providers. The bipartisan legislation also increases the amount VA will reimburse medical professionals for education debt reduction and recruits medical scribes to assist physicians so that doctors can focus on serving veterans instead of filling out paperwork.

In addition, the bipartisan legislation improves the community health care for veterans by establishing one community care program that allows veterans and their doctors to choose where the veterans' health care needs are best addressed. It expands eligibility for VA caregiver support services to veterans of all eras, and modernizes and strengthens support services. It also streamlines the process for veterans to access community providers and, at the insistence of Senator Baldwin, strengthens safety measures and guidelines for private providers to prescribe opioids to veterans.

The *VA MISSION Act* is supported by 38 Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs) and Military Service Organizations (MSOs), including the American Legion, the Disabled American Veterans, the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the Paralyzed Veterans of America – the full list of supporting organizations is available [here](#). The legislation is also supported by seven former VA Secretaries – the full list is available [here](#).

**Senator Baldwin authored two key VA reforms aimed at improving the quality of care for veterans that were included in the final legislation that passed the Senate today:**

***Andrew White Veterans Community Care Opioid Safety Act***

Section 131 includes Senator Baldwin's bipartisan *Andrew White Veterans Community Care Opioid Safety Act*, bipartisan legislation she introduced last year to strengthen the opioid therapy safety and pain care that veterans receive through both the VA community care programs and private providers.

In 2016, to improve opioid safety and care for our veterans, Congress passed and President Obama signed bipartisan legislation introduced by Senators Baldwin and Shelley Moore Capito (R-WV). The *Jason Simcakoski Memorial and Promise Act*, "Jason's Law," strengthens VA's opioid prescribing guidelines, puts in place

stronger oversight and accountability, and provides safer and more effective pain management services for our nation's veterans. In April of this year, Senator Baldwin secured full funding for "Jason's Law," included in the Fiscal Year 2018 omnibus spending bill signed by President Trump.

While VA has made progress increasing opioid safety and reducing overprescribing within the VA health care system through "Jason's Law," recent reports have found that veterans receiving opioid therapy from community care providers, including through the VA Choice program, are at a significant risk. A July 2017 [VA Office of Inspector General report](#) on opioid prescribing in VA community care programs found that contract providers are not subject to many of the opioid safety reforms included in "Jason's Law" and implemented at VA. Specifically, community care providers are not aware of and thus, not complying with, VA opioid therapy and safe prescribing protocols. Furthermore, VA is not consistently tracking opioid prescriptions from community care programs due to significant information exchange gaps between VA and non-VA providers.

Senator Baldwin's *Andrew White Veterans Community Care Opioid Safety Act* will ensure that contracted providers have reviewed the evidence-based guidelines for prescribing opioids set forth in the Opioid Safety Initiative before providing care through the community care program. This section would also require VA to implement a process to make certain that community care providers have access to available and relevant medical history of the patient, including a list of all medication prescribed to the veteran as known by VA.

### **Veterans ACCESS Act**

Section 108 includes Senator Baldwin's bipartisan *Veterans ACCESS Act* which will allow the VA to deny, suspend or revoke the eligibility of a non-Department health care provider to participate in the community care program if the provider was previously removed from VA employment or had their medical license revoked. Currently, a loose patchwork of VA regulations are intended to stop fired VA providers from participating in VA-administered community care programs. However, VA's continued lack of consistent implementation of national standards at the local level demonstrates that Congress must act and not leave veterans' health and safety to chance. Baldwin's legislation will ensure that our nation's veterans are treated by the same high-quality, qualified health care professionals whether they are receiving care through the VA or a community care program.

More information on the VA *MISSION* Act is available [here](#).