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U.S. Sen. Baldwin: Work to improve care for Wisconsin veterans passes full Senate

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Bipartisan legislation fully funds Jason's Law, invests in opioid treatment and prevention, and supports Gulf War and Homeless Vets

WASHINGTON, D.C. – U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin, a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, worked to include a number of measures in the bipartisan FY19 Military Construction-VA Appropriations Bill, which was included in the FY19 funding package that passed the full Senate this evening. The House and Senate will now reconcile their versions of this appropriations bill and send to the President for his signature.

"This bipartisan legislation that passed the full Senate includes many reforms that I worked for to improve services and care for our veterans. By working across party lines I was able to secure full funding for the opioid safety initiatives outlined in Jason's Law, a significant increase in opioid treatment and prevention funding, and improvements in care for our Gulf War and homeless veterans," said Senator Baldwin. "There is much more to do, and I am grateful that we are working together to fix problems at the VA and put in place bipartisan solutions that serve our veterans and their families. I am looking forward to the President signing this important legislation."

Jason's Law: Safer Care for Veterans

Senator Baldwin worked to include $52 million for implementation of the Jason Simcakoski Memorial and Promise Act, or “Jason’s Law.” Signed into law in 2016, Senator Baldwin’s bipartisan legislation earned the support of the Simcakoski family, Disabled American Veterans (DAV), Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), The American Legion, and other veterans service organizations. Jason’s Law is holding the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) accountable, strengthening oversight of the VA’s opioid prescribing practices and providing safer care for our veterans.

Earlier this year, Senator Baldwin secured full funding for implementation of Jason’s Law in the FY2018 omnibus spending bill signed by President Trump.

Jason’s Law strengthened the VA’s Opioid Safety Initiative, and in Wisconsin the bipartisan reform has helped the Tomah VA Medical Center achieve a 47 percent decrease in the number of veterans on chronic opioids. For veterans on opioids and benzodiazepines, there has been a 76 percent reduction.

Funding for Opioid Treatment and Prevention

Senator Baldwin secured a significant increase in opioid treatment and prevention funding to support veterans receiving care at the VA.

The bipartisan bill includes $18 million to implement Opioid Treatment and Prevention programs Senator Baldwin got included in the VA MISSION Act that President Trump recently signed into law. The funds will be used to expand treatment options for veterans and develop programs aimed at ensuring non-VA providers treating veterans through Care in the Community programs are held to the same standards set by Jason’s Law.

Improving Inspector General Operations

The FY19 MILCON/VA Appropriations bill includes $192 million for the Office of the Inspector General (OIG), which is a $28 million increase from the President’s request. This funding will help ensure the OIG does not have to reduce its staff and will allow them to improve their oversight responsibilities over the VA’s budget and initiatives.

The bipartisan legislation also includes an amendment cosponsored by Senator Baldwin to ensure that the VA OIG can investigate, audit and conduct oversight of the nation’s largest health care system without being hindered by political delays,

non-cooperation and stall tactics by the VA.

Increased Funding Opportunities to Help Homeless Veterans

In her role on the Appropriations Committee, Senator Baldwin has fought for funding to help reduce veteran homelessness in Wisconsin. This legislation includes $1.8 billion for VA Homelessness programs and $450 million for the Supportive Services for Veterans Families program.

In addition, Senator Baldwin helped secure $40 million in the Transportation, Housing and Urban Development Appropriations bill for 5,100 new HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (VASH) vouchers. These vouchers combine rental assistance for homeless veterans with clinical services provided by the VA and are critical to reducing veterans' homelessness.

Enhanced Research for Illnesses Affecting Gulf War Veterans

Gulf War Veterans claiming disability get denied at much higher rates than average. In fact, according to the U.S. Government Accountability Office, only 17 percent of claims get approved.

That is why Senator Baldwin worked to include language that directs the VA to improve approval rates, including through the streamlining of the claims process and better training of claims processing personnel. She also included report language recommending the VA continue Gulf War Illness research and make the findings public, along with improve training for providers on the illness.

Prioritizing Military Construction

The bipartisan MILCON/VA Appropriations legislation funds 169 military construction projects, totaling $10.3 billion. This includes $23 million for construction of a new barracks and $6.2 million for the ongoing construction of new family housing units at Wisconsin's Fort McCoy.

Badger Army Ammunition Plant

Public health hazards and negative ecological impacts have occurred at former military sites like the Badger Army Ammunition Plant, which is why Senator Baldwin included report language to accelerate cleanup efforts at the plant. The legislation directs the Army to work with local stakeholders and to consider the construction of

a municipal drinking water system to support the Town of Merrimac.