

OUR VISION

FOR VETERANS



Congressman Tom Reed

23rd District, New York

2016

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

I. A Message from Tom Reed	Pg. 1
II. Returning Home After Active Duty	Pg. 2
III. Veterans and Their Families	Pg. 3
IV. Health Care for Our Veterans	Pg. 4
V. Women Veterans	Pg. 6
VI. Conclusion	Pg. 7
VII. Appendix – References to Legislation	Pg. 8



A Message from Tom Reed

Dear Veteran,

As the son of a career Army officer who was promoted through the enlisted ranks, I care about the struggles that veterans and their families face. I understand them because I have been there – and that personal experience motivates my desire to serve our veterans and their families. We must ensure that they have the resources and assistance necessary to live their lives to the fullest.

The countless men and women who have selflessly fought to preserve and protect our country, and our freedoms, deserve our respect and appreciation when they return home. We, as a nation, must respond by meeting our veterans' changing needs. It is only right that we work together to find solutions to current problems and ensure that *promises made are promises kept*.

“Our Vision For Veterans” provides a set of proposed solutions to address the most pressing needs of today’s veterans. These solutions are the results of countless conversations, phone calls, meetings and town-halls with local and national veterans. Our solutions include: providing better healthcare for our veterans, including women veterans; holding Veterans Affairs (VA) accountable for failures; supporting our military families; and helping our active duty service members seamlessly transition to civilian life.



Tom Reed, NY-23

***“When the peace treaty is signed,
the war isn’t over for the veterans,
or the family. It’s just starting.”***

Karl Marlantes, author and
decorated Marine veteran

Unfortunately, our government has not delivered on its promises, failing to provide the services and benefits our veterans have earned. It is time that we come together and protect those who have protected us.

With that in mind, we encourage you to review our plan and provide us with your feedback. How can we improve veterans programs? What do veterans and their families need to ensure a smoother transition into civilian life? To share your thoughts and suggestions, please contact our Corning

office at (607) 654-7566, visit us online at Reed.House.gov, or connect with us on social media at [facebook.com/RepTomReed](https://www.facebook.com/RepTomReed) or [@RepTomReed](https://twitter.com/RepTomReed) on Twitter.

We remain committed to ensuring our veterans get the respect, appreciation, and quality services they deserve.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tom Reed', written in a cursive style.

Tom Reed
Member of Congress

Congressman Reed’s office has a dedicated caseworker on his staff to help with issues specific to veterans and stands ready to serve. If you, or a veteran you know, needs help getting the benefits they deserve, please contact our Corning office at (607)654-7566 and ask for Doc Schmitz.

RETURNING HOME AFTER ACTIVE DUTY

Returning home from active duty can be a daunting challenge. Uncertainty often leaves veterans worried and stressed about the future. *Where am I going to work? Should I go back to school? Will my experience in the military transfer over to civilian life?* It is our job as Members of Congress to help address these concerns through commonsense legislation that recognizes the unique skills, talent and work ethic of returning veterans, and prioritizes their needs.

- 1) Establish a Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration to focus on veterans' transition to civilian life:

According to a recent Pew survey, just over fifty percent of post-9/11 veterans who responded to a recent poll agreed that transition assistance prepared them to successfully transition from active duty to civilian life. House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Chairman Jeff Miller's legislation, H.R. 2275 – **Jobs for Veterans Act of 2015**¹ addresses the needs of transitioning veterans.



Reed listens to concerned veterans during a town hall meeting in Westfield.

- 2) Reward businesses for hiring veterans:

H.R. 3236, which includes the **Hire More Heroes Act**² and H.R. 91 – **Veterans Identification Card Act of 2015**³ were both signed into law in July of 2015. These pieces of legislation encourage businesses to hire more veterans by reducing regulations and removing financial barriers. Veterans can now easily identify themselves as veterans to businesses seeking new hires.

- 3) Provide grants to schools for Veteran Student Centers:

Other veterans wish to further their education before returning to the workforce. However, on a large college campus it may be difficult to connect with those who have shared similar experiences in the military. H.R. 1399 – **Veteran Education Empowerment Act**⁴, provides money to build or improve a one-stop shop for student veterans to find academic support, networking opportunities, peer mentorship, financial assistance, counseling and career services.

VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES

The return home from active duty is not just an adjustment for the veteran alone; their entire family is impacted. We care about veterans and their families and it is only fair that we provide support and services to both.

- 1) Support child care programs at VA Hospitals:

More than a third of those responding to a recent Blue Star Families survey said they were unable to find childcare that fits their family's current schedule. Originating in 2010, the **VA Child Care Pilot** program provided assistance to qualified veterans for child care expenses while they received care at Veterans Health Administration (VHA) medical facilities. This pilot is a strong first step to providing these families with the targeted care that they need.

- 2) Support family caregivers:

There is currently a backlog of tens of thousands of family caregivers waiting for their application to be approved by the VA in order to provide care and treatment to their loved ones. H.R. 3989 – the **Support Our Military Caregivers Act**⁵ allows outside entities to assist the VA in processing these applications more quickly.

- 3) Eliminate loopholes that wrongly eliminate benefits:

Families of those who made the ultimate sacrifice should never be left struggling to collect benefits that are rightfully theirs. H.R. 1594 - the **Military Surviving Spouses Equity Act**⁶, ensures surviving spouses and the children of service members killed on active duty or service-connected causes receive the annuities they need. Additionally, removing the “widow’s tax” would allow survivors of deceased servicemembers to keep their military Survivor Benefit Plan when military service results in the death of their spouse.



Reed meets with area veterans in Van Etten for a town hall meeting.



VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES (CONT'D)

- 4) Ensure descendants can be properly diagnosed and treated:

Often, it is not just the veteran that suffers from the wounds of war. To compound the issue, a lack of understanding and/or misdiagnosis can keep our veterans and their families from receiving the proper care once symptoms appear. H.R. 1769 – the **Toxic Exposure Research Act**⁷ creates a national center for research and diagnosis of health conditions found in descendants of individuals exposed to toxic substances while serving in the Armed Forces.

- 5) Ensure death benefits accurately reflect true costs:

The loss of a loved one is traumatic. Funeral benefits given to families by the VA no longer accurately reflect the true costs of funerals. **H.R. 1911**⁸ increases funeral expense payments and plot allowance benefits given to families and automatically increases the benefit based on yearly inflation. This will ensure that families don't have to worry about covering the cost of a funeral and can focus on mourning their loved one. In addition, H.R. 250 – the **Families of Fallen Service members First Act**⁹ makes sure that these benefits will always be paid out on time, even in the unlikely event of a government shutdown.

HEALTH CARE FOR OUR VETERANS

Our nation's veterans sacrifice so much to serve this great nation. Their wounds, both visible and invisible, are increasingly complex and wide-ranging. It is our responsibility to ensure that they are consistently given the care and support they need to make a full recovery. Veterans deserve timely access to VA health care through both standard VA Hospitals and through the Veterans Choice Program. The VA must be held to high standards and accountable for any shortcomings.



- 1) Prevent suicide:

Fourteen percent of post-9/11 veterans who responded to a Blue Star Families poll admitted thoughts of suicide during their time in the military. The **Clay Hunt Suicide Prevent for American Veterans Act**¹⁰ was signed into law in February of 2015. It expands access to important mental health care for our veterans.

HEALTH CARE FOR OUR VETERANS (CONT'D)

2) Expand options for care and treatment:

The **Veterans Equal Access Act**¹¹ would allow doctors at VA hospitals in states where medical marijuana is legal to discuss medical marijuana with veterans as an alternative treatment.

Giving veterans the flexibility to choose their doctor is a crucial component of affordable and accessible healthcare.

The **Veterans Choice Program** allows veterans who are more than 40 miles away from the nearest VA medical facility, or who have been waiting more than 30 days for an appointment, to visit a local doctor at no cost to them. This program, however, needs to be expanded and improved so veterans can get timely and correct referrals to local doctors.

The VA must improve this program to make sure those physicians that see veterans are paid promptly and fairly. The program needs to be streamlined so that eligibility requirements are straightforward and all veterans can understand the totality of healthcare options available to them. **Keeping our Promises to Veterans Act of 2015**¹² expands the eligibility requirements to include more veterans who wish to use the program.

3) Treat all veterans exposed to Agent Orange:

The **Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act**¹³ expands the number of veterans eligible to receive VA benefits if they suffer from illnesses linked to Agent Orange.

4) Address the backlog:

Veterans deserve to be seen and treated in a timely manner. The current disability claims backlog needs to be addressed by the VA to make sure that disabled veterans have their cases reviewed in an appropriate amount of time and properly handled. Disabled veterans deserve rational and unbiased care to ensure quality benefits.



Reed visits with veteran at annual 'Valentines for Vets' at the VA Medical Center in Canandaigua.



Reed joins with Blue Water Navy families to rally lawmakers to pass legislation which will help those impacted by Agent Orange get the benefits they deserve.

WOMEN VETERANS



Women represent approximately 20 percent of new recruits and account for 14.5 percent of all active duty soldiers. And recent changes in Department of Defense policy have opened the military to women in specialized roles that were previously restricted to men only. This presents new challenges and opportunities for women veterans and their families.

As the fastest growing group of veterans enrolling in the VA health care system, the VA must adopt a new focus that incorporates the needs of both men and women veterans. The VA needs to expand its ability to deliver gender-sensitive health care services to meet the needs of women veterans.

1) Ensure gender-specific care at all VA Medical Centers:

With only two thirds of VA Medical Centers having a gynecologist on staff, it is clear that the VA must expand its health care services for women. VA Medical Centers should provide a full range of primary and specialty care to women, including services for gender-specific preventative screening, breast care, gynecology specialty care, prenatal and obstetrical care, neonatal care and infertility services. H.R. 1356 – the **Women Veterans Access to Quality Care Act of 2015**¹⁴ directs the VA to establish standards to ensure all VA medical facilities meet the gender-specific needs of veterans including privacy, safety, and dignity.

2) Expand access to gender-sensitive mental health programs

Women who served in Afghanistan and Iraq have higher rates post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). H.R. 2915 – the **Female Veteran Suicide Prevention Act**¹⁵ directs the VA to identify mental health care and suicide prevention programs that are most effective for women. The VA should continue on this path and develop a pilot program for gender-specific group counseling to treat women veterans suffering from PTSD.



3) Expand treatment options for sexual trauma victims:

We must pass H.R. 1603 – the **Military Sexual Assault Victims Empowerment Act (Military SAVE Act)**,¹⁶ which would make veterans eligible for treatment in non-VA facilities who were victims of sexual trauma that occurred while the veteran was serving on active duty. These assaults are horrific and the survivors of these attacks must be given the support they need.

WOMEN VETERANS (CONT'D)

4) Develop specialized transition programs:

Women veterans are more likely than their counterparts to be unemployed after returning from service. This unacceptable reality means we must continue to increase support services for women veterans as they transition to civilian life. The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) should conduct an assessment to determine any specific needs of women and develop specialized programs to ensure that women veterans have the resources and training needed to enter the civilian workforce. The VA should work with local communities and establish peer support networks for women veterans to ease readjustment issues.

CONCLUSION

We remain committed to ensuring veterans and their families get the help they deserve. We firmly believe that the recommendations in this plan will help guide the VA towards delivering better medical treatment and increased access to quality care.

We must make a concerted effort towards improving programs that veterans find helpful, reforming those that need reform, and removing those that are wasteful or duplicative. The current state of the VA concerns many; we can and must take targeted approaches to fixing and improving the system.

We are confident that together, we can work to fulfill the promises made to our veterans and their families, promote their well-being, and provide for those who have sacrificed so much for us.



Appendix – References to Legislation

¹ **H.R. 2275 [114th] - Jobs for Veterans Act of 2015**

Rep. Miller (R-FL)

Current status: Passed the House on 2/9/16 as part of the Veterans Employment, Education, and Healthcare Improvement Act

Page 2 – Returning Home from Active Duty

² **H.R. 22 [114th] – Hire More Heroes Act**

Rep. Rodney Davis (R-IL)

Current status: Signed into Law on 7/31/2015 as part of the Surface Transportation and Veterans Health Care Choice Improvement Act

Page 2 – Returning Home from Active Duty

³ **H.R. 91 [114th] - Veterans Identification Card Act of 2015**

Rep. Buchanan (R-FL)

Current status: Signed into Law on 7/20/2015

Page 2 – Returning Home from Active Duty

⁴ **H.R. 1399 [114th] - Veteran Education Empowerment Act**

Rep. Frankel (D-FL)

Current status: Referred to the House Education and the Workforce Committee

Page 2 – Returning Home from Active Duty

⁵ **H.R. 3989 [114th] - Support Our Military Caregivers Act**

Rep. Stefanik (R-NY)

Current status: Passed the House on 5/23/2016

Page 3 – Veterans and Their Families

⁶ **H.R. 1594 [114th] - Military Surviving Spouses Equity Act**

Rep. Wilson (R-SC)

Current status: Referred to the House Armed Services Committee

Page 3 – Veterans and Their Families

⁷ **H.R. 1769 [114th] - Toxic Exposure Research Act of 2016**

Rep. Benishek (R-MI)

Current status: Referred to House Committees on Veterans' Affairs & Armed Services

Page 4 – Veterans and Their Families

⁸ **H.R. 1911 [114th] - To amend title 38, United States Code, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to increase certain veteran funeral benefits**

Rep. Hunter (R-CA)

Current status: Referred to the House Veterans' Affairs Committee

Page 4 – Veterans and Their Families

⁹ **H.R. 250 [114th] – Families of Fallen Service Members First Act**

Rep. Connolly (D-VA)

Current status: Referred to the House Committee on Appropriations

Page 4 – Veterans and Their Families

¹⁰ **H.R. 203 [114th] - Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act**

Rep. Walz (D-MN)

Current status: Signed into Law on 2/12/2015

Page 4 – Health Care for Our Veterans

¹¹ **H.R. 667 [114th] - Veterans Equal Access Act**

Rep. Blumenauer (D-OR)

Current status: Referred to House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Page 5 – Health Care for Our Veterans

¹² **H.R. 1532 [114th] – Keeping our Promises to Veterans Act of 2015**

Rep. Emmer (R-MN)

Current status: Referred to House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Page 5 – Health Care for Our Veterans

¹³ **H.R. 969 [114th] - Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2015**

Rep. Gibson (R-NY)

Current status: Referred to House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Page 5 – Health Care for Our Veterans

¹⁴ **H.R. 1356 [114th] - The Women Veterans Access to Quality Care Act of 2015**

Rep. Coffman (R-CO)

Current status: Referred to House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Page 6 – Women Veterans

¹⁵ **H.R. 2915 [114th] – Female Veteran Suicide Prevention Act**

Rep. Brownley (D-CA)

Current status: Passed the House on 2/9/2016

Page 6 – Women Veterans

¹⁶ **H.R. 1603 [114th] – Military SAVE Act**

Rep. Barr (R-KY)

Current status: Referred to House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Page 6 – Women Veterans