

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **For Immediate Release:** | **Contact:** Megan Taylor |
| August 2, 2017 | 202-224-6244 |

**Senate Updates House Bill to Strengthen Veterans’ Rights in VA Appeals Process**

*Senate-Passed Bill Returns to House for Final Vote*

**Washington, D.C.** – U.S. Senator Dean Heller (R-NV) worked to strengthen protections for veterans in the U.S. House of Representatives-passed Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act, bipartisan legislation that was passed by the U.S. Senate to overhaul the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) appeals process. The bill will now head back to the House of Representatives to be considered.

Heller, a cosponsor, [voted in the VA Committee to advance the Senate version of the Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act](https://www.heller.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/pressreleases?ID=CE669680-D3D4-4395-9DD8-F7143502D0B7) (S.1024), which creates three different options for veterans who wish to appeal their case. A veteran would be able to seek a higher-level review by a regional office on the same evidence, file a supplemental claim with a regional office with the ability to submit additional evidence, or appeal directly to the Board of Veterans’ Appeals with the possibility of a hearing or the ability to submit additional evidence. This legislation will also institute safeguards to ensure the VA has a plan to address pending appeals, the authority to test facets of the new appeals system, and compare data between the new and old system to gauge its success in serving veterans and their families.

Heller, along with Chairman of the Veterans’ Affairs Committee Johnny Iskason (R-GA) and his Senate colleagues, worked to improve the House-passed bill to see that policies to protect veterans in the appeals process were included in the Senate version of the bill. Specifically, the Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act now contains the new appeals framework that ensures veterans who do not wish to have a hearing at the Board of Veterans’ Appeals do not have to wait in line behind cases in which a hearing has been requested; requires the VA to develop policies to allow veterans to modify the information included in a notice of disagreement and to change dockets at the Board of Veterans’ Appeals; and requires the VA to assist veterans in obtaining records needed to support a supplemental claim for benefits.

“I’m proud to have worked with my colleagues in the U.S. Senate to stand up for veterans’ rights and add protections for them in our legislation to overhaul the VA appeals process,” **said Heller**. “As a senior member of the U.S. Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee and Co-Chair of the Senate VA Backlog Working Group, I worked hard to improve the VA’s disability claims process. While  many veterans now receive a faster claim decision, it isn’t always accurate and they are then sometimes forced to wait years for a decision on their appeal. Our legislation provides Nevada’s veterans with more options to appeal a case and put the VA on a path to give veterans answers and, furthermore, compensate them for their injuries of war. We still have a lot of work to do, and I’ll continue to hold the VA’s feet to the fire when it comes to reducing the claims and appeals backlog.”

[As the Co-Chair of the bipartisan Senate VA Backlog Working Group](https://www.heller.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/pressreleases?ID=2daa6da5-8c7a-447d-951a-c03e9f1f11e9), Heller has long advocated for solutions to expedite the processing of veterans’ disability claims and ultimately reduce the VA claims backlog, which still hovers around 90,000 claims. In the last Congress, Heller introduced the 21st Century Veterans Benefits Delivery Act, legislation designed to address the current claims backlog by overhauling the claims process to withstand a surge in claims. That bill was [included in a larger veterans legislative package, which was signed into law](https://www.heller.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/pressreleases?ID=971372BC-A7E5-468A-9C64-1ACD72EAB363https://www.heller.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/pressreleases?ID=971372BC-A7E5-468A-9C64-1ACD72EAB363).

*###*

