|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| cid:image001.png@01D15CFD.F676B0F0

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **For Immediate Release:** | **Contacts:** Neal A. Patel/Michawn Rich  |
| February 1, 2016 | 202-224-6244 |

**Heller Joins Fellow Senators to Introduce Bill to Fix Backlog of VA Appeals****(Washington, DC) –** U.S. Senators Dean Heller (R-NV), Dan Sullivan (R-AK), Bob Casey, Jr. (D-PA), and Jon Tester (D-MT) have introduced *S. 2473, The Express Appeals Act*, legislation establishing a new, voluntary five-year pilot program to help reduce the large backlog of appeals made by veterans to the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA).   “As Co-Chair of the [Senate VA Backlog Working Group](http://www.heller.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/pressreleases?ID=0fc103f4-e52c-4c2b-833b-f1eee7cace02), ensuring Nevada and our nation’s veterans receive a decision on their disability claims in an accurate and timely manner has been a top priority for me in the Senate and on the Veterans’ Affairs Committee. The story is no different when a veteran appeals their claim decision. These heroes feel the VA has made a mistake and should not be penalized by having to wait two or more years for an appeal to be complete. This bill gives veterans more choice and flexibility to expedite their appeal while also preserving their rights, and I am proud to be a part of this effort to improve the process. I would like to thank my colleague Senator Dan Sullivan for his leadership on this important issue, and I am pleased to have Senators Casey and Tester right alongside as we fight for those who sacrificed,” **said Senator Dean Heller.**  “It is astonishing to me that an average veteran waits nearly 1,000 days – or almost three years – for the VA to resolve an appeal of one their benefit decisions. Proud veterans across the U.S. – including more than 77,000 in Alaska – should not have to endure these absurd, multi-year wait times just to see their cases resolved. I am hopeful that – with the support of my colleagues – this bill will create a less-bureaucratic appeals express lane through which the VA can resolve its growing backlog of appeals quickly and favorably for all of our nation’s veterans,” **said Senator Dan Sullivan.** “Veterans have performed dedicated service to this country and it is our obligation to make sure their benefits process is as seamless as possible. It is unacceptable that our veterans are waiting on average three years to receive a decision on their appeal. With nearly one million veterans in Pennsylvania, it is crucial that we work to ensure that veterans get timely and accurate decisions on their appeals. As co-chair of the Senate VA Backlog Working Group, I am proud to join my colleagues on this important bill which will streamline the process, allowing quick resolve for benefits appeals and addressing the ever-existent backlog that we have been trying to defeat,” **said Senator Bob Casey.**  “While the VA is making progress on reducing the overall disability claims backlog, veterans who file an appeal are too often waiting years to get a final determination by the VA. By cutting bureaucratic red tape, this legislation provides veterans the option of having their disputes with the VA determined in a much more timely manner that reflects our commitment to them and their families. This is a common-sense bipartisan bill that will save the VA millions,” **said Senator Jon Tester.**“DAV and other stakeholders have been advocating for Fully Developed Appeals (FDA) for quite some time now and strongly support S. 2473, the *Express Appeals Act of 2016*, to create an FDA pilot program. With over 400,000 appeals sitting in a growing backlog, it is imperative to move forward with commonsense reform proposals like the FDA that have broad support in Congress, VA, the Board of Veterans Appeals and the veterans community. We look forward to working with Senator Sullivan and the other Senate and House sponsors to pass this much-needed FDA legislation into law in order to help veterans get quicker and more accurate final decisions on their claims for benefits. DAV is grateful to Senators Sullivan, Casey, Heller and Tester for their leadership and continued commitment to this critical legislation,” said **Garry Augustine, Disabled American Veteran Washington Headquarters Executive Director.** **Background:** * As of January 2016, 400,000 veterans have appeals pending with the VA.
* *The Express Appeals Act* would establish a new channel whereby veterans, upon receiving a decision on an original claim by the VA, would have the option to file an express appeal with the Board of Veterans Appeals (BVA), in lieu of the traditional appeals process.
* The express appeals process would consolidate the traditional process aimed at reducing veterans’ wait times.
	+ First, the appeals pilot program would omit the remand process, in which the BVA sends a veteran’s appeal back to the VBA for additional evidence development, saving the veteran an average of 545 days.
	+ Second, the veteran would submit a “Statement of Argument,” detailing how the VBA decided their original claim incorrectly, in place of the VBA’s own time-consuming development of a “Statement of Case,” saving veterans an average of 408 days.
* Additionally, entrance into this program would be completely voluntary and a veteran would be able to exit the express appeals process at any time and re-enter the traditional pipeline at the end of the line with no adverse consequences.

 S. 2473 has been referred to the Senate Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, of which three of the bill’s four sponsors are members.### |