

child's best interests will be served thereby, the vocational training program may begin before the child's 18th birthday."

(d) *EFFECTIVE DATE.*—*The amendments made by this section shall take effect as of October 1, 1997.*

Amend the title so as to read: "An Act to amend title 38, United States Code, to revise, extend, and improve programs for veterans."

Mr. ROCKEFELLER. Mr. President, as the ranking minority member of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I am enormously pleased that the Senate is considering S. 714, as amended, a bill that would make valuable changes to a number of veterans benefits and services. In the waning days of this session, the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees were able to reach compromise on a wide range of programs and services for veterans—from programs to assist homeless veterans, to providing home loans to Native American veterans, and I urge my colleagues to give their unanimous support to this measure. It is particularly fitting that we make these improvements for veterans programs now, since tomorrow is Veterans Day.

Mr. President, because all the provisions of this measure—which I will refer to as the compromise agreement—are set forth in the joint explanatory statement which Senator SPECTER will place in the RECORD, I will discuss here only some of the issues which are of particular interest to me. The explanatory statement was developed in cooperation with the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs and that committee's chairman, BOB STUMP, will insert the same explanatory statement in the RECORD when the House considers this measure.

EXTENDING AND IMPROVING THE NATIVE AMERICAN HOUSING LOAN PILOT PROGRAM

Mr. President, section 201 of the compromise agreement will extend for 4 years the authority for the Native American Housing Loan Pilot Program, under section 3761, title 38, United States Code. This pilot program was created in 1993 to provide loans to eligible Native American veterans to purchase, build, or improve dwellings on Native American trust lands. This program is so important because commercial lenders will not finance the purchase of homes on Native American lands, as lenders cannot foreclose in the event of default. Therefore, the traditional VA loan guaranty program is not, in effect, available to Native American veterans residing on tribal lands.

This program has been very successful in financing purchases of homes by Pacific Islanders. However, it has been somewhat underutilized by other Native American populations. Therefore, this bill would also provide for enhanced outreach by VA to inform Native American veterans of the availability of this program. It further

tasks VA with analyzing what is working and what could be improved in its administration of the program.

I would like to commend Senators AKAKA and CAMPBELL for their tireless advocacy on behalf of Native American veterans.

REINVENTING VA'S EEO SYSTEM

Title 1 of the compromise agreement will establish a new employment discrimination complaint system for the VA. This provision ensures that the employees who perform equal employment and opportunity (EEO) counseling and investigations are professional and independent by creating a new office to adjudicate complaints, separate from line management.

The Committee has had grave concerns about how VA has handled several high profile EEO complaints filed against senior staff members. Therefore, this bill also provides for VA to submit a separate report regarding complaints filed against senior level employees, based on their personal conduct. I believe it is critical that VA's actions be subject to congressional scrutiny, in order to assure accountability.

I want to thank Senator GRAHAM for his leadership on this important issue.

SPINA BIFIDA ELIGIBILITY CLARIFIED

Mr. President, section 404 of the compromise agreement will clarify the eligibility—for compensation, health care, and educational assistance—of the children with spina bifida born to Vietnam veterans exposed to Agent Orange. Currently, the eligibility of the child is determined by looking to the veteran father. However, under title 38 of the United States Code, a former service member who received a dishonorable discharge is generally not considered a veteran, and is therefore not eligible for veterans benefits from the VA.

It was Congress' intention to provide benefits to all Vietnam veterans' children with spina bifida. Congress did not mean to exclude the children of veterans with dishonorable discharges.

This provision will clarify the eligibility criteria to include the child with spina bifida of a Vietnam veteran regardless of the character of his discharge. This is a minor modification in the law, but to the children who suffer from spina bifida, these benefits can make a significant difference in their lives. These benefits can improve their quality of health care, provide educational opportunities, and enhance their quality of life. It would be a great injustice if these children were denied these benefits because of their fathers' discharge status.

MAMMOGRAPHY POLICY

Section 208 of the compromise agreement seeks to address a discrepancy

between VA's stated principles and their clinical practice with respect to breast cancer programs. Though a guiding principle of the Veterans Health Administration states that "the quality of care in VHA must be demonstratively equal to, or better than, what is available in the local community," in my view, VHA's breast cancer detection policy fails to achieve community standards because it only targets women between the ages of 50 to 69.

Section 208 requires the VA to adopt a comprehensive national policy on breast cancer detection. Rather than requiring the VA to adhere to a specific clinical standard, the provision relays the sense of the Congress that VA's policy be in accordance with guidelines issued by the Secretary of Health and Human Services and the Director of the National Institutes of Health.

Mr. President, it is very important that veterans have access to preventive diagnostic tests to protect their health. Because breast cancer is the leading cause of cancer in women, I look forward to receiving VA's national policy on breast cancer detection.

I thank Senator SPECTER for his leadership on this issue.

HEALTH PROFESSIONAL SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

Mr. President, I am pleased that the authority for the Health Professional Scholarship Program has been extended for one year. Aspiring health professionals have a strong interest in the scholarship program, and it has proven to be an effective recruitment tool for the VA in the past. Staffing analyses done within the VA have identified a need to increase the levels of nurse practitioners and physician assistants to adjust to the shift from inpatient to outpatient care, and this program is well suited to assist individuals in these career paths. We will continue to evaluate this program and look for other opportunities that will increase both recruitment and retention of health professionals in the VA.

MAJOR MEDICAL FACILITY PROJECTS CONSTRUCTION AUTHORIZATION

Of the projects authorized under title III of this bill, I am especially pleased that we have included the authorizations for projects in northern California. I have been concerned that veterans in northern California have not been receiving convenient VA health care services ever since the Martinez VA Medical Center was closed in 1991.

The conference agreement authorizes VA to move ahead with plans to create an accessible network of VA health care by specifically authorizing funds for upgrades and enhancements to McClellan Hospital at Mather Field in Sacramento and improvements to the outpatient clinics at Mare Island in