

impose sanctions. That is why I am supporting this bill. I urge my colleagues to do the same.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

Thank you.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Indiana.

VETERANS CHOICE PROGRAM

Mr. DONNELLY. Mr. President, I rise today to talk about the Veterans Choice Program and the challenges some of Indiana's veterans are experiencing with its implementation.

Our veterans have served our country and have sacrificed for our country every day. Some come home bearing physical or mental wounds. Some bear both. Serving also means being away from their families, who also sacrifice for us. Veterans have missed their sons' or daughters' first words, first steps, birthdays, little league games, holidays, and many other life milestones that we all treasure.

When our veterans first come home, they are met with the many challenges of settling back into everyday life, which can include stress from finances to reconnecting with their wife or husband and sons and daughters. Some, as mentioned, must deal with the physical and mental wounds of war.

All of our vets should be able to have peace of mind that they will be able to have a good-paying job and access to quality health care. Our veterans should not be burdened with wondering if or when they will be able to schedule a medical appointment.

While we can never fully repay our veterans or their families for their service and sacrifice, our country has a sacred responsibility to honor our veterans and to take care of them. Serving our veterans and making sure they receive the best care possible, whether for physical ailments or for mental health challenges, is something I take very seriously. We are committed to ensuring each and every one of them has access to quality care and the full range of benefits they have earned by their service.

Following gross mismanagement and misconduct at several VA medical centers nationally, in 2014 Congress passed the bipartisan Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act that was signed into law. The law established the Veterans Choice Program to help address the inadequate access to care that our vets were facing. The program is designed to enable veterans who can't see a VA doctor within 30 days or who live more than 40 miles from a VA facility to access a local non-VA provider using a Veterans Choice Card.

Unfortunately, there are repeated examples of the Veterans Choice Program coming up short. It is our responsibility as legislators to review, follow up, and ask questions about this program we helped to put in place to make sure it is working correctly and efficiently.

I stand here today to state that some Indiana veterans are experiencing

problems with the Veterans Choice Program, and we must work to address these issues and to solve them.

There are two third-party vendors contracted to help the VA implement the Veterans Choice Program around the country and in Indiana—Health Net Federal Services, which covers most of our State, and TriWest, which extends into parts of southern Indiana. Instead of making Veterans Choice Program appointments directly with local hospitals, veterans must use Health Net Federal Services or TriWest. In recent weeks, our office has heard from Indiana veterans who are experiencing long wait times of up to 90 minutes on the phone and disconnected calls when they contact Health Net Federal Services.

I share the stories of some of these veterans and the struggles they have dealt with. Vietnam vet Daniel Vice from Marion, IN, had eye surgery through the Veterans Choice Program and had been told by Health Net that his postoperation appointments would also be covered. When he was at the eye doctor for his follow-up appointment, he learned that Health Net Federal Services had not sent over his paperwork. This meant that instead of being covered by the Veterans Choice Program, Dan would have to pay out of his own pocket. Dan contacted our office while at the doctor seeking help. Our case manager called Health Net only to be put on hold for 21 minutes before speaking to a supervisor. The company could not provide immediate answers but called back our staff a few hours later and said that Dan's paperwork had not been approved. We continue to work with Dan to get answers to solve this problem.

Veteran Robert Trowbridge, from South Bend, had surgery on his ankle almost 6 months ago and has yet to be scheduled for his post-op physical therapy. He called Health Net many times and was put on hold for 30 to 40 minutes each time he called. When he was able to reach a rep, he was told repeatedly that his paperwork was sent to be approved, only to find out 4 months later that there was a problem. He was later informed that his Social Security number was not attached to his file. Frustrated, Robert contacted our office for assistance.

Our staff experienced firsthand the frustrations and inadequate customer service that some of our vets like Robert face. One of our case managers called Health Net and it took 23 minutes into the conversation with a representative before the customer service rep even asked for the veteran's name. After calls with a representative, then a supervisor, and then a manager from Health Net Federal Services, we were finally able to work with the manager to resolve the issue for Robert.

What our veterans are going through to schedule appointments and access their benefits through the Veterans Choice Program is completely unacceptable. Our office continues to work

to assist vets who experience difficulties.

I have called on Health Net Federal Services to get answers. We need to get to the bottom of this problem, and we need to ensure that all Hoosier veterans and all American veterans and their families receive the timely and quality care they deserve.

I will work nonstop to end this problem, and our office will continue to work nonstop to make sure we get to the bottom of the problems that our Hoosier veterans are having with the Veterans Choice Program. They gave too much to this country to be treated this way. We will solve these problems for Hoosier veterans and for every American veteran.

I yield back the remainder of my time.

Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. CARDIN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Mr. CARDIN. Mr. President, I rise today to join the American people in celebrating Black History Month, but it should be noted that the immeasurable role African Americans have had in making the Nation the strong Nation that it is today could not be fully recognized in 1 short month. Black history is American history.

This February we highlight the titans of African-American history: Marylanders such as Harriet Ross Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and Thurgood Marshall; icons, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Dr. Dorothy Height; and contemporary heroes, such as JOHN LEWIS and Mae Jemison.

We all celebrate the countless men and women whose names will never grace the history books or newspapers, those who fought each day for freedom and equality, those who pushed the limits of innovation, and those who endured and overcame hardships over the centuries.

As we celebrate, the struggle to ensure all Americans under the law are treated equally under the law rages on. I believe that as much as Black History Month is about reflecting on a rich past, it is also a time for all Americans to contemplate how to create a better future.

It is not enough simply to recognize the great contributions that African Americans have made, to honor those who have come before us; we must use Black History Month as a springboard to bring about positive change in America. I have a number of legislative priorities that relate directly to Black History Month and to building a better future.