

make sure we improve VA healthcare and enhance access to VA medical facilities.

I am particularly concerned by recent findings made by the VA inspector general, Michael Missal, about a troubling lack of health information sharing between VA and non-VA providers relating to chronic pain treatment. To put it very simply and bluntly, the lack of information sharing makes opioid addiction far more likely than it should be, especially among veterans who seek care from private providers through the Choice system.

Connecticut was one of the first States in the country to have a statewide prescription drug monitoring program. I urged Secretary Shulkin at a hearing last year to make sure the VA prescription drug monitoring program exchanges information with the State system, which has data from private providers. The sharing of information is vital to prevent doctor shopping and excessive prescriptions. Without it, veterans potentially are susceptible to weaknesses and gaps that enable them to seek excessive prescriptions of opioid pain killer treatment that can lead to addiction and worse.

We cannot allow the Veterans Choice Program to exacerbate opioid addiction. We must do everything we can to stop the opioid epidemic that is ravaging our communities. As Senator MANCHIN of West Virginia and other colleagues have made clear, the VA must close the information gap on opioid prescriptions through improved opioid safety initiative guidelines and enhanced prescription drug monitoring programs. While we work in Congress to reform the Choice Program, I call on the VA to immediately take certain commonsense steps, none of them novel or original. They have been identified by the inspector general:

First, require all participating VA Purchased Care providers to receive and review evidence-based guidelines for prescribing opioids.

Second, implement a process to ensure all Purchased Care consults for non-VA care include a complete, up-to-date list of medications and medical history.

Third, require non-VA providers to submit opioid prescriptions directly to a VA pharmacy for dispensing and recording in the patient's VA electronic health record.

Fourth, ensure that if facility leaders determine that a non-VA provider's opioid prescribing practices conflict with the guidelines, immediate action is taken to ensure the safety of all veterans receiving care from that non-VA provider.

These are basic protections for our veterans. They are protections against overprescribing opioids or negligent misconduct—and worse—on the part of non-VA providers and others.

My hope is that we are beginning on a path to better information sharing between those prescription drug monitoring programs at the State level for

non-VA providers and the VA facilities and providers who care for our veterans directly. That information sharing is not a luxury or convenience; it is a necessity.

We must help veterans of every era with their need for prompt appeals dispositions and effective healthcare that also protects them from opioid addiction. I am hopeful the Senate will quickly pass the Harry Walker Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act, which has been unanimously approved by the House, to make comprehensive improvements to the GI bill. I helped to draft this measure and lead it, and I am proud the House has approved it.

We must also help veterans of all eras suffering from toxic exposure and make sure we award a Congressional Gold Medal to the American Legion and make USERRA protections for our servicemembers meaningful and enforceable. These steps are part of an unfinished agenda that we owe our veterans. We cannot shirk that duty. We cannot postpone it. It is an obligation, not a convenience.

I look forward to moving forward with these efforts, as we have done with Choice and with the appeals reform, and to learning what we know already—that we can work together across the aisle when it comes to keeping faith with our veterans and making sure that no veteran of any era is left behind.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Arkansas.

TRIBUTE TO BILL REED

Mr. BOOZMAN. Mr. President, I rise today to recognize Bill Reed, an Arkansan who is retiring after more than 34 years of dedicated service at Riceland Foods, the world's largest miller and marketer of rice.

Bill is a member of the company's senior management team whose responsibilities include government affairs, public relations, and the Riceland Sustainability Initiative. His interest in agriculture at a young age led him to pursue degrees in this field. Bill earned a bachelor's degree with honors in plant and soil science from the University of Tennessee and a master's degree in agricultural journalism from the University of Wisconsin.

In 1976, he moved to the Natural State to work as a State specialist with the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service. He has continued his commitment not only to Arkansas but to Arkansas agriculture for more than 40 years.

Bill is recognized as one of the most passionate advocates on behalf of the Arkansas rice industry. Bill is constantly looking out for the rice farmers and businesses by promoting policies to grow the industry and pushing for expanding markets. His advocacy extended beyond the boundaries of agriculture. He was always ready to lend a hand to me or to my staff on any issue important to Arkansas.

He shares his passion for agriculture throughout the State, country, and the world as a representative of Riceland on numerous boards and trade associations, including the USA Rice Federation and the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives. In addition, Bill serves as chairman of the Associated Industries of Arkansas, vice president for agriculture of the Arkansas State Council on Economic Education, and vice chairman of the board of visitors of Phillips Community College of the University of Arkansas.

He is a faithful servant of Jesus Christ and is leading his life as Christ calls us to do. In recent years, Bill began seminary school, and his retirement from Riceland will allow him to pursue the ministry full time and help people in need.

I appreciate Bill's friendship, and I am confident that he will excel in this role, just as he had done as an advocate for Arkansas rice. I wish him well in all of his future endeavors and look forward to the great work he will continue to do in helping the great State of Arkansas.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

LEGISLATIVE SESSION

Mr. McCONNELL. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to legislative session and that following my remarks the Senate resume executive session as under the previous order.

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

AFG AND SAFER PROGRAM REAUTHORIZATION ACT OF 2017

Mr. McCONNELL. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to the immediate consideration of Calendar No. 168, S. 829.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report the bill by title.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read as follows:

A bill (S. 829) to reauthorize the Assistance to Firefighters Grants program, the Fire Prevention and Safety Grants program, and the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response grant program, and for other purposes.

There being no objection, the Senate proceeded to consider the bill, which had been reported from the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, with an amendment to strike all after the enacting clause and insert in lieu thereof the following:

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.

This Act may be cited as the "AFG and SAFER Program Reauthorization Act of 2017".