

OPINION

Veterans groups, members of Congress still fighting for ‘concurrent receipt’

By STEPHEN THOMAS

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With the full-throated support of numerous national veterans-service organizations, lawmakers are introducing bills in the 118th Congress to fully repeal the offset of military retired pay for every cent of disability compensation that a military retiree receives from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. VSOs name this doctrine “concurrent receipt,” which is shorthand for the U.S. government paying military retirees who have service-connected disabilities every dime they are owed from both funds, without reducing retired pay by the amount of disability compensation.

The VSOs have been fighting for concurrent receipt for decades. Eliminating the compensatory offset was on the legislative agendas of numerous veterans’ groups when I left the Washington-based national staff of one of those congressionally chartered organizations in 2004. I am in favor of it. The time has come to stop making all service-connected military retirees — not just a precious few — pay for their own disability compensation. The medically retired must be included as well.

There was a time when every military retiree with a service-connected disability was ineligible for concurrent receipt. Between 2004 and 2014, Congress made incremental progress. Rep. Gus Bilirakis, R-Fla., pointed that out Dec. 13 in his remarks on the House floor before the close of the 117th Congress. “Under current law,” he said, “concurrent receipt for military retirees who have a disability rating of 50 percent or higher was phased in through 2014. While that certainly marked tremendous progress, medically retired veterans with less than 20 years of service who were wounded in combat must still offset their DOD retirement pay by their VA disability compensation. So unfair. So unjust.”

The Florida congressman is the principal sponsor of H.R. 303, one of the concurrent receipt bills filed in the current session. Bilirakis introduced the bill Jan. 11, and it has since been assigned to two House committees — Armed Services and Veterans’ Affairs. Taking language straight from the bill, it is intended “to permit additional retired members of the Armed

Forces who have a service-connected disability to receive both disability compensation from the Department of Veterans Affairs for their disability and either retired pay by reason of their years of military service or combat-related special compensation.”

Also in the House, Rep. Sanford D. Bishop Jr., D-Ga., introduced H.R. 333 on Jan. 12 “to permit retired members of the Armed Forces who have a service-connected disability rated less than 50 percent to receive concurrent payment of both retired pay and veterans disability compensation, to extend eligibility for concurrent receipt to chapter 61 disability retirees with less than 20 years of service.” The House Armed Services and Veterans’ Affairs committees will be busy with this bill as well.

Meanwhile, in the upper chamber, Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont., introduced S. 344 on Feb. 9, which, according to the bill’s summary, is intended “to provide for concurrent receipt of veterans’ disability compensation and retired pay for disability retirees with fewer than 20 years of service and a combat-related disability,” keeping the medically retired in conversation. The measure, which has been referred to the Senate Armed Services Committee, had 48 co-sponsors on Feb. 16.

The American Legion, DAV, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and other VSOs continue to advocate for the enactment of additional concurrent receipt legislation. I am with them.

Tester, Bilirakis and Bishop are joined by other like-minded members of Congress, in both major political parties, who strive to erase the inequity. There surely will be even more concurrent receipt bills introduced in this Congress. One would believe there is enough bipartisan steam behind these efforts to get concurrent receipt legislation across the finish line. White House intervention could make a difference.

VFW National Commander-in-Chief Timothy M. Borland wrote a letter to President Joe Biden dated Jan. 17 urging the president to make concurrent receipt legislation a priority in this, the 118th, Congress. Borland wrote, “With such little progress in nearly twenty years to sunset remaining offset policies, it has become clear that political will is lacking, warranting the White House’s leadership.” It can’t hurt.

Stephen Thomas is a Navy veteran and a policy analyst in the public sector who is neither a military retiree nor a recipient of VA disability compensation. He has a Master of Jurisprudence degree in Compliance, Business Law, and Risk from St. Mary’s University School of Law.





The U.S. Capitol is seen in Washington, D.C., on July 6, 2022. (Carlos Bongioanni/Stars and Stripes)

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