

# U.S. SENATOR BOB CASEY



FIGHTING *for a* FAIR SHOT *for* FAMILIES, KIDS *and* SENIORS

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## Honoring our Veterans

Senator Casey believes we have an abiding obligation to serve the brave men and women who have served their country. President Lincoln outlined a simple but vitally important mandate when it comes to the care that is owed to our Veterans: “To care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow, and his orphan.” We must also recognize the sacrifices borne by the families of Veterans – by the mothers and fathers and especially the spouses and children. These loved ones not only provide an invaluable support system but often serve as caregivers when their servicemember or Veteran returns home. Pennsylvania has one of the highest populations of Veterans with nearly 1 million Veterans.

## Veterans Benefits

- Veterans and their families who have sacrificed greatly for our country deserve timely and accurate decisions on benefits that they have earned. Senator Casey’s office has heard from many Veterans and their family members who are extremely frustrated with the VA claims process. Unfortunately, some have even shared that they have waited two years for action on their claim. Senator Casey formed the VA Claims Backlog Working Group in 2013 and first introduced the **21st Century Veterans Benefits Delivery Act** with Senator Heller of Nevada to fix the claims process and bring a measure of accountability to the VA.
- Senator Casey reintroduced the **21st Century Veterans Benefits Delivery Act (S.1203)** and the **VA Backlog Working Group 2015 Report** in May 2015 to address the many gaps that remain. The 21st Century Veterans Benefits Delivery Act will reform the disability claims process so that Veterans and their families in Pennsylvania and across the nation receive the benefits they have earned. The Senate unanimously passed this important legislation, which was signed into law on December 16, 2016, as part of a larger package of legislation addressing Veterans issues called the Jeff Miller and Richard Blumenthal Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2016. In Pennsylvania, the average processing time for a disability claim has dropped from 332 days in April 2013 to approximately 110 days in May 2018, more than a seven month reduction in wait times for Veterans.
- While VA continues to make progress in the disability claims backlog, we cannot ignore the growing appeals backlog. By streamlining this complex and outdated process, we can help ensure that Veterans get the care they deserve. Senator Casey introduced the **Express Appeals Act (S.933)**, which would establish a 5-year pilot program to expedite decisions on disability claims appeals. Senator Casey also joined his colleagues in introducing the **Department of Veterans Affairs Appeals Modernization Act (S.1024)** to replace the current appeals process by giving Veterans three clear options after receiving an initial decision. This bill was passed into law in August 2017.
- The VA, including facilities in Pennsylvania, has faced significant allegations of mismanagement and misconduct. Senator Casey introduced the **Department of Veterans Affairs Bonus Transparency Act** with Senator Heller to provide an important measure of transparency and accountability by requiring annual reports on bonuses awarded to senior VA employees around

the country. This legislation was enacted into law as part of the John S. McCain III, Daniel K. Akaka, and Samuel R. Johnson VA Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks Act of 2018.

## Mental Health and Suicide Prevention

Servicemembers make tremendous sacrifices for our country, especially when deployed, and battling on the front lines can make transition to civilian life a challenge. As we welcome home the brave men and women who have served our country, we have seen an increase in the number of Veterans suffering from symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injury (TBI).

- Senator Casey strongly supports robust funding for mental health programs because he believes all Veterans with mental health challenges deserve resources and support. For example, Senator Casey sent a letter to the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction and Veterans Affairs requesting full funding for FY17 for mental health care so that programs like the Veterans Crisis Line and others are able to fully respond to Veterans.
- Senator Casey regularly hears from constituents about the importance of talking with other servicemembers and Veterans upon their return from deployment. Peers who have shared experiences are critical resources and support systems. Senator Casey is a cosponsor of the **Veteran PEER Act** (S.2210), a bill that will expand the availability of peer specialists into the primary care setting at VA medical centers.
- In June 2018, Senator Casey voted in favor of a bipartisan amendment to Military Construction and Veterans Affairs appropriations bill, which requires an assessment of the Veterans Crisis Line to ensure that at-risk Veterans are being effectively served.
- Senator Casey is an original cosponsor of the **Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention Act** which was signed into law on February 12, 2015. The Clay Hunt Act will improve mental health care and suicide prevention programs and increase information for Veterans about available VA services.

## Women Veterans

While the VA has made progress in improving the care and support women Veterans deserve, many gaps remain to ensure that the VA meets their specific needs. Senator Casey cosponsored the **Female Veteran Suicide Prevention Act** (S.2487), which requires the VA to identify mental health care and suicide prevention programs that are most effective for women veterans. The President signed this important bill into law on June 30, 2016. Senator Casey is also a cosponsor of the **Women Veterans Access to Quality Care Act** (S.471), which would require VA to establish standards in its health care facilities to meet the specific needs of women Veterans.

## Homelessness and Access to Housing

- Senator Casey introduced the **Veterans Homebuyer Accessibility Act of 2015** (S.2277), which would provide an \$8,000 refundable tax credit for specially adaptive housing modifications, and an \$8,000 first time homebuyer tax credit for all eligible Veterans. This bill would make it easier for disabled Veterans to perform necessary adaptive modifications to their homes so they are able to live comfortably and independently.
- Senator Casey has also called for Congress to support robust funding for the VA's homelessness-related programs, including the Supporting Services for Veteran Families Program, the Grant and

Per Diem Program, and the Housing and Urban Development-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing Program.

### Expand Access to Care

- Senator Casey is a cosponsor of the **Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act (S.422)**, which would clarify current law so that Veterans who served in the Vietnam War who were exposed to Agent Orange would be fully covered by the VA if they served up to 12 miles offshore of Vietnam, and also cosponsored the **Toxic Exposure Research Act (S.951)**, which would designate a VA medical center to serve as the national center for research on the diagnosis and treatment of health conditions of the descendants of individuals exposed to toxic substances, including Agent Orange, during their time in service.
- Senator Casey was a cosponsor of the **State Veterans Homes Adult Day Health Care Improvement Act**, which was enacted into law on March 27, 2018. This bill will expand Adult Day Health Care services to State Veterans Homes for veterans who are 70% or more service connected disabled.

### Holding the VA Accountable

- The VA must be held accountable to ensure they are providing our Veterans with the timely and quality care that honors the sacrifices they've made to our nation. Senator Casey has long conducted oversight into mismanagement in the VA and has sent letters to Secretaries of the VA and to the Veterans Benefits Administration regarding reports from the Inspector General detailing allegations of mismanagement and data manipulation.
- Senator Casey was also a cosponsor of the **VA Equitable Employee Accountability Act (S.1856)** in the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress, which would increase accountability at the VA while preserving the due process rights of whistleblowers and other employees so that they can still make disclosures about issues of mismanagement without the fear of immediate job loss as at-will employees.