

(Washington, D.C.)- Today, U.S. Representative Mike Coffman, R-CO, introduced legislation to increase the responsiveness of the federal government to the needs of veterans while simultaneously increasing the rate of veteran employment. The Veterans Employment Act of 2012 will expand employment opportunities for veterans in the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) by requiring that only qualified veterans be first considered for hiring. Under Coffman's legislation, only when a qualified veteran cannot be found for an opening in the VA can a nonveteran applicant be hired to fill a position.

The VA has a workforce of 318,856 civilians, but only 32 percent have actually ever worn the uniform. The number of claims for veterans' disability benefits that take more than 125 days to complete has reached 560,000 unresolved cases. The Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES) designed to make the transition from wounded warrior to veteran status more efficient, still averages 394 days to process each veteran's claim.

Coffman, a Marine Corps combat veteran who also served in the Army, believes that some of the problems in the VA stem from a bureaucratic culture where many of the employees are not sufficiently motivated to work harder on behalf of veterans and their issues. He believes that increasing the number of veterans working at the VA will not only impact the unemployment rate among veterans but, more importantly, will raise the awareness of the challenges faced by those who have served in uniform and make the VA ultimately more compassionate and less bureaucratic.

"Having served in both the U.S. Army and the Marine Corps, I understand the strong bond of compassion shared between veterans of all uniforms and across all generations," Coffman said. "A significant increase in the number of veterans working at the VA will help reduce the systemic inefficiencies that have plagued the department."

The American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, National Association for Uniformed Services and National Guard Association of the United States have all endorsed Coffman's bill.

"With veteran unemployment unacceptably high the VA, as the largest sector of the government concerned with the care of veterans, would seemingly be an obvious choice as a prime employer of veterans," said Fang Wong, National Commander of the American Legion. He added, "This legislation would make strides toward remedying this discrepancy."

“The VA is an agency designed to serve veterans, which the VFW believes makes it the perfect agency to also employ veterans,” said VFW Executive Director Bob Wallace. “Even with five and ten-point hiring preferences, many times it is still difficult for a veteran’s resume to rise to the top when seeking federal employment. Congressman Coffman’s bill recognizes this shortcoming and ensures that VA can now play a proactive role in employing veterans, keeping with the vision that Secretary Eric Shinseki laid out for the agency at a time when so many of our heroes have trouble finding good careers when they return home.”

Nearly 17 percent of Iraq and Afghanistan service members face joblessness when they leave the military. More than 12 percent of all veterans who left the service since 2001 are currently unemployed.

“Increasing the number of veterans employed at the VA, while decreasing the number of unemployed veterans, is a commonsense policy that benefits everyone,” Coffman said.

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