

homes suitable for occupancy. Currently, a disabled veteran must at least partly own his or her residence to receive VA housing assistance grants to perform necessary residence modifications, such as installing wheelchair ramps or railings. However, many younger veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan have not yet had the opportunity to become homeowners. Being ineligible for VA funding assistance to modify their homes, these veterans and their families often are compelled to either shoulder the costs of retrofitting their residences or face extended stays in VA medical facilities.

Section 101 of S. 1235 will establish a 5-year pilot program to allow severely disabled veterans who live temporarily with family to receive up to \$10,000 in adaptive housing assistance; less severely disabled veterans could receive a maximum of \$2,000. This grant money will help ensure that all disabled veterans—regardless of whether they own property—are able to leave hospitals and return home as quickly as possible.

Also, mindful that these individuals will likely purchase their own residence, the bill will allow disabled veterans to receive two additional specially adaptive housing grants to be used for homes that they own in the future. Severely disabled veterans could receive a total of \$50,000 to modify residences; less severely disabled veterans would be eligible for a total of \$10,000. Only one of the three total grants could be used for a temporary residence, such as a family-owned home.

America's veterans have made enormous sacrifices to protect our Nation and the ideals for which it stands. Our country owes a special obligation to those men and women who have become disabled as a result of their service. Under no circumstances should these American heroes be divided into groups of "haves" and "have nots."

This Nation must do no less than to ensure that all disabled veterans are returned to the normalcy of home life as quickly and comfortably as possible. The common sense changes put forth in section 101 of S. 1235 do just that, and I urge my colleagues in the Senate to send this bill to President Bush to sign in to law in time, fittingly, for Memorial Day.

Mr. AKAKA. Mr. President, as ranking member of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I urge my colleagues to support our current servicemembers, veterans, and their families by supporting the pending measure, the final agreement on the Veterans' Housing Opportunity and Benefits Improvement Act of 2006. This is a vital and timely piece of legislation that has already passed the House of Representatives. With Senate passage today and the President's signature it will quickly become public law.

Mr. President, this measure, which I shall refer to as the "Compromise Agreement," will improve and expand a wide variety of veterans benefits and programs, including, among others,

housing benefits for Native American veterans and severely disabled servicemembers; insurance benefits for certain disabled veterans; compensation benefits for former prisoners of war; and programs that provide assistance to homeless veterans.

This legislation is appropriate at a time when our servicemembers are in harm's way. We must always remember the sacrifices that our servicemembers, both past and present, have made on behalf of this great Nation and we must do our part to respond to their service by improving and expanding veterans benefits.

In 1992, I authored the legislation that established a pilot program to make direct housing loans to Native American veterans for homes on tribal lands. As of the end of April, VA had made 504 loans to this group of veterans. Under this program, VA offers loan guarantees that protect lenders against loss up to the amount of the guaranty if the borrower fails to repay the loan. Prior to the enactment of this law, Native American veterans residing on tribal lands were unable to qualify for VA home loan benefits. With the Native American Veteran Housing Loan Program indigenous peoples residing on trust lands are now able to use this very important VA benefit. I am pleased that the Compromise Agreement contains a provision derived from legislation I offered, S. 917, that would make this pilot program, which was set to expire on December 31, 2008, permanent.

The Compromise Agreement also extends, from 1 to 2 years, the amount of time a disabled servicemember has to convert his or her Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance coverage into Veterans' Group Life Insurance coverage. This change is being made so that veterans may concentrate on recovering from their injuries or conditions, and not on meeting deadlines for life insurance conversion.

Under current law, former prisoners of war have to been held for a minimum of 30 days before they can benefit from a presumption that certain diseases are linked to their service. The Compromise Agreement also would add heart disease and stroke to presumptive conditions for service-connection for former prisoners of war.

Homelessness among veterans is a critical problem. It is particularly troubling to me that an estimated 56 percent of today's homeless veterans are minorities. The homeless rate in my home state of Hawaii has nearly doubled since early 2000, with the majority of Hawaii's new homeless being Native Hawaiians. The city of Honolulu has a tremendous problem with affordable housing, increasing the possibility of becoming homeless for those who already struggle to make ends meet. The Compromise Agreement would reauthorize through fiscal year 2009 the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Programs, which are the only Federal programs dedicated wholly to providing

employment services to homeless veterans.

Also included in the Compromise Agreement is my provision that would make a technical change to the specially adapted housing grant program. Last session, the law that allows severely disabled members of the Armed Forces to receive specially adapted housing grants from VA, while still on active duty, was inadvertently repealed. My provision would correct this and restore the grant to its original intent.

In conclusion, I thank Senator CRAIG and the benefits staff on the majority for their work on this comprehensive bill, especially Jon Towers, Amanda Meredith, and Lupe Wissel and, on the Democratic staff Dahlia Melendrez, Pat Driscoll, and Noe Kalipi for their hard work on this legislation.

Mr. President, I urge my colleagues to support this legislation on behalf of America's veterans and their families.

Mr. FRIST. I ask unanimous consent the Senate concur in the House amendments, the motion to reconsider be laid upon the table, and any statements related to the bill be printed in the RECORD.

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

MEASURE READ THE FIRST
TIME—S. 3064

Mr. FRIST. Mr. President, I understand there is a bill at the desk, and I ask for its first reading.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will read the title of the bill for the first time.

The assistant legislative clerk read as follows:

A bill (S. 3064) to express the policy of the United States regarding the United States relationship with Native Hawaiians and to provide a process for the recognition by the United States of the Native Hawaiian governing entity.

Mr. FRIST. Mr. President, I now ask for its second reading, and in order to place the bill on the calendar under rule XIV, I object to my own request.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Objection having been heard, the bill will receive its second reading on the next legislative day.

ORDERS FOR FRIDAY, MAY 26, 2006

Mr. FRIST. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that when the Senate completes its business today, it stand in adjournment until 8:45 a.m. on Friday, May 26. I further ask consent that following the prayer and pledge, the morning hour be deemed expired, the Journal of proceedings be approved to date, the time for the two leaders be reserved, and the Senate proceed to executive session and resume consideration of Executive Calendar No. 632, the Kavanaugh nomination; provided further that all time during the adjournment of the Senate count under rule XXII.