

Many veterans have been denied VA health care under the current ban. Take, for example, California, where over 22,500 veterans have been denied enrollment; or Texas, where 23,800 have been denied access since 2003. This phenomenon is not limited to the larger States—17,000 veterans in Pennsylvania; 12,300 in Illinois; 36,000 in Florida; and over 14,000 in North Carolina have all been denied VA health care.

Also, I want to clarify that we are not talking about allowing veterans with “upper-income” entry into VA care. While the administration, and some of my colleagues, characterize Priority 8 veterans as “higher-income,” that is not necessarily the case. The current income eligibility threshold for VA health care is under \$28,000 a year—which can hardly be classified as a “high-income” salary. In my home State of Hawaii, where the cost of living is one of the Nation’s highest, the average salary for a veteran who has been denied is \$39,300 a year.

It is not just in Hawaii, but in many other States as well. For example, in South Carolina, the threshold is \$31,650 a year; in North Carolina, \$32,000 a year is considered low-income. These are not meaningless numbers—the dollar values represent the hard work of veterans who have served honorably and are now earning well below the median income for their area.

No, these are not poor veterans. But one devastating illness without health care coverage, and make no mistake about it, they will be impoverished.

Many of these veterans do not have any other form of health insurance. A recent study conducted by researchers at Harvard University found that nearly 1.8 million veterans are uninsured. This suggests that there are veterans in Priority 8 who are stuck in the middle between not making enough money to afford their own private insurance and making too much to qualify for VA care. No veteran who served their country honorably should be denied care when they need it because they were fortunate enough not to have been wounded in combat.

I also urge Members to read the text of the contested provision relating to Category 8 veterans. If the Secretary of Veterans Affairs sees opening up enrollment as too much of a financial burden, the Secretary could simply publish a decision in the Federal Register to again block these veterans. Congress is not seeking to overstep the Secretary’s authority to determine who can come through VA’s doors.

Finally, Senator CRAIG calls the inclusion of enrollment for middle-income veterans, a “last minute” addition. I say with a smile, that while time does seem to stand still in the Senate, I would remind my colleague that the bill enabling full enrollment was introduced last April, it was the subject of a hearing last May, and was marked up by the committee in June. This is not something that can be characterized as a “last-minute” change.

Now I turn briefly to address concerns raised about S. 1315, the committee’s omnibus veterans benefits legislation. The proposed Veterans’ Benefits Enhancement Act of 2007 is a comprehensive bill that includes benefits for a broad constituency of servicemembers and veterans, particularly those who are service-disabled. Provisions in this bill would also improve benefits for World War II Filipino veterans, virtually all of whom are now in their 80s or 90s.

While not providing Filipino veterans living outside the United States with benefits identical to those provided to veterans living in the United States, I am satisfied that the provisions in S. 1315 are equitable and should be adopted. It is important to note that S. 1315 would fix a historical wrong.

Filipino veterans served under the command of the United States military during World War II. They were considered by the Veterans’ Administration, the predecessor of the Department of Veterans Affairs, to be veterans of the United States military, naval and air service until that status was revoked by the Rescission Acts of 1946. Therefore, as a matter of fundamental fairness and justice, Filipino veterans’ benefits should be similar to those of other veterans.

Those who oppose the pension provision in S. 1315 argue that the pension that would be provided through this legislation is too high. However, pension benefits are designed to allow wartime veterans and their survivors to live in dignity—above the poverty level. I am satisfied that the levels of pension designated in this bill would allow these veterans to live with such dignity, while finally giving them the recognition that they so richly deserve.

I urge my colleagues on the other side of the aisle to take a good look at the facts surrounding the provisions contained in both S. 1233 and S. 1315 that some on the other side are objecting to, and to realize that opposing these bills on the current basis provided effectively denies valuable and meaningful benefits to our Nation’s veterans.

In closing, I again stress that all we are seeking is a time agreement that will allow for debate. For those who believe that there are provisions in these two bills that should not be approved by the Senate, offer amendments, debate the merits, let the Senate vote. That is the least we can do as we seek to meet the needs of our Nation’s veterans.

Mr. President, I yield the floor and suggest the absence of a quorum.

Mr. SALAZAR. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. HARKIN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that there now be a period of morning business, with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each.

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

TRIBUTE TO BRIGADIER GENERAL BENJAMIN J. SPRAGGINS

Mr. LOTT. Mr. President, I wish to take this opportunity to recognize and say farewell to an outstanding Air Force officer, BG Benjamin J. Spraggins, upon his retirement from the Air Force after more than 34 years of service. Throughout his career, Brigadier General Spraggins has served with distinction, and it is my privilege to recognize his many accomplishments and commend him for his service to the Air Force, the Congress, and our grateful Nation.

Brigadier General Spraggins is a longtime resident of my home State and devoted public servant of Harrison County, MS. He enlisted in the U.S. Air Force on March 17, 1972. After over 6 years of successful enlisted service, reaching the grade of technical sergeant, Brigadier General Spraggins received his commission from the Academy of Military Science, McGhee Tyson, TN. Following graduation from Officer Candidate School, Brigadier General Spraggins completed aviation school at Mather Air Force Base, CA, and RF-4C training at Shaw, Air Force Base, SC. Brigadier General Spraggins was then stationed with the 187th TRG at Dannelly Field, AL, flying the RF-4C fighter aircraft. While stationed in the 187th, Brigadier General Spraggins served in many critical positions, including instructor, scheduling officer and assistant chief of standards and evaluations. He flew the RF-4C from 1979 to 1983 and was a weapons instructor in the F-4D from 1983 to 1988 at the 187th Fighter Wing. Brigadier General Spraggins completed his military flying career with over 2,500 hours in the T-37, T-43, RF-4C, and F-4D aircraft.

On September 23, 1987, Brigadier General Spraggins was assigned to the Combat Readiness Training Center, Gulfport, MS. During his tenure at the training center, he served in various positions, including range control officer, director of operations, operations group commander, and finally as commander of the Combat Readiness Training Center. As commander, Brigadier General Spraggins was responsible for operations and training of over 20,000 military personnel annually and provided oversight for a \$75 million budget.

Concurrently, Brigadier General Spraggins was sent to Andrews Air Force Base, DC, in 2002 to run the Crisis Action Team for the Air National Guard. In 2003, he also served as the commander of the 186th Air Refueling Wing, where he was responsible for operations of KC-135 aircraft wing, with