

Senate Leader Highlights Legislative Efforts Toward Improving Veteran Health Care Experience

Data and legislation can improve veteran access to health care services.

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U.S. Senator John Boozman at the Veterans Digital Transformation Breakfast. Photo Credit: Rod Lamkey Jr.

With congressional bipartisan support for the Department of Veterans Affairs via budgetary appropriations and necessary agency oversight, veteran access to health care services could be improved through the effective use of data and legislation, U.S. Senator John Boozman said at the [Veterans Digital Transformation Breakfast](#) Nov. 7.

“The VA is doing a tremendous job in a number of different areas,” said Boozman, who chairs the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies. This includes massive legacy IT overhaul projects, such as the one aiming to improve interoperability between electronic health records within the Defense Department and the VA.

“[We’re] spending [over] \$16 billion for DOD and VA to speak to each other,” Boozman said, in regards to the 10-year Cerner modernization plan. “To put that into perspective, an aircraft carrier [unit] costs about \$13 billion.”

Though some may argue that congressional backing and monetary funds have been less of a concern for the VA compared to other federal agencies, Boozman claimed the monetary resources have not been enough to reduce the high rate of veteran suicide.

Out of the 20 veterans who commit suicide each day, 14 do not have contact with the VA, Boozman said. “We’ve quadrupled the amount of money that we’re spending on the issue, [but] we don’t have the bang for the buck that we’d like in reducing that number.”

The Veterans Health Administration, the largest VA health care integrator, has about 9 million veterans enrolled in its care. Currently, there are 18.2 million veterans residing in the U.S. Out of those veterans who are not enrolled, there are opportunities in using data tools to effectively identify and contact those outstanding veterans. Through the MISSION Act, nontraditional providers could direct those veterans to the VA for better care.

“We’re going to measure and make sure that we’re pushing the money in the right direction, again, in an effort not to compete with the VA,” Boozman said, “but to get this 14 that we currently don’t have in the system so that they’re aware of the VA.”

Using data has led to efficiencies in “dramatically” shortening the wait times for veterans’ benefits, and the MISSION Act will further help, he said.

“The feedback that I've gotten back from the providers and the veterans has been good so far,” said Boozman. “As we take this data that we've gotten over this five months [since the implementation of the MISSION Act], it'll help us better, but right now, I think we're providing the resources.”

During the keynote, the senator pledged funding toward additional case workers for the VA. He said he would also advocate for more effective, automated ways to process veteran benefits claims rather than by hand.

“Myself and others are going to press hard to make sure that we do that,” he noted.

In regard to rapid and technological changes happening at the VA, Boozman reaffirmed the need to think and act accordingly.

“The Department of Veterans Affairs, like every other department, is a much different world than it was even 10 years ago,” he said. “We have different technology that's out there, we have an aging veteran population, and then we've got all of these young people that are coming on board. As a result of that, we just have to adapt.”

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