

Tentative deal reached on VA reform

July 28 2014, by Matthew Daly

(AP)—The chairmen of the House and Senate Veterans Affairs committees have reached a tentative agreement on a plan to fix a veterans' health care system scandalized by long patient wait times and falsified records covering up delays.

Republican Rep. Jeff Miller and independent Sen. Bernie Sanders scheduled a news conference for Monday to talk about a compromise plan to improve veterans' care.

Miller chairs the House veterans panel, while Sanders chairs the Senate panel.

A spokesman for Sanders said Sunday the men have reached a tentative agreement. The deal requires a vote by a conference committee of House and Senate negotiators, and votes in the full House and Senate.

Miller and Sanders said in a joint statement that they "made significant progress" over the weekend toward agreement on legislation to reform the Veterans Affairs Department, which has been rocked by reports of patients dying while awaiting VA treatment and mounting evidence that workers falsified or omitted appointment schedules to mask frequent, long delays. The resulting election-year firestorm forced VA Secretary Eric Shinseki to resign in late May.

The plan set to be announced Monday is intended to "make VA more accountable and to help the department recruit more doctors, nurses and other [health care](#) professionals," Miller and Sanders said.

Few details of the agreement were released, but the bill is expected to authorize billions in emergency spending to lease 27 new clinics, hire more doctors and nurses, and make it easier for veterans who can't get prompt appointments with VA doctors to get outside care.

Louis Celli, legislative director for the American Legion, the largest U.S. veterans group, said the deal would provide crucial help to veterans who have been waiting months or even years for VA health care.

"There is an emergency need to get veterans off the waiting lists. That's what this is all about," Celli said Sunday.

An updated audit by the VA this month showed that about 10 percent of veterans seeking medical care at VA hospitals and clinics still have to wait at least 30 days for an appointment. About 46,000 veterans have had to wait at least three months for initial appointments, the report said, and an additional 7,000 veterans who asked for appointments over the past decade never got them.

Acting VA Secretary Sloan Gibson has said the VA is making improvements, but said veterans in many communities still are waiting too long to receive needed care. The VA provides health care to nearly 9 million enrolled veterans.

A veteran died last month after collapsing in an Albuquerque, New Mexico, veterans hospital cafeteria. The man waited 30 minutes for an ambulance, officials said.

Sanders proposed a bill last week that would cost about \$25 billion over three years. Miller countered with a plan to approve \$10 billion in emergency spending, with a promise of more spending in future years under the normal congressional budget process.

Miller's bill would keep most of the provisions in a Senate-passed bill and would authorize about \$100 million for the Veterans Affairs Department to address shortfalls in the current budget year.

Both bills cost significantly less than bills approved last month by the House and Senate.

Negotiations had appeared in jeopardy Thursday after Miller and Sanders announced their competing plans, then held separate news conferences lashing out at each other. The men resumed talks in private Thursday night.

The House and Senate are set to adjourn at the end of the week until early September, and lawmakers from both parties have said completing a bill on [veterans](#)' health care is a top priority.

The Senate is expected to vote this week to confirm former Procter & Gamble CEO Robert McDonald as the new VA secretary, replacing Gibson.

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Citation: Tentative deal reached on VA reform (2014, July 28) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-07-tentative-va-reform.html>

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