



Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

February 17, 2012

The Honorable Leon E. Panetta
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense, the Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Panetta,

I write today with regard to H.R. 1832, the Servicemembers Telemedicine and E-Health Portability (STEP) Act, which I authored and introduced. The legislation was subsequently included as Section 713 of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2012, under the section title "Expansion of State licensure exception for certain health care professionals." As the Department of Defense (DoD) moves forward with the law (P.L. 112-81), I respectfully request the diligent and thorough implementation of Section 713, and ask to be updated on progress and the development of an implementation timeline.

Section 713 of the NDAA has the potential to transform and help improve access to care for our servicemen and women, their families, and retirees. Section 713 corrects an archaic state licensure policy, and will allow the DoD to increase care capacity while realizing cost savings if properly implemented. Historically, state licensure requirements have prevented health care professionals from being able to perform tele-health across state lines, with limited exemptions permitting tele-health to be conducted between federal facilities.

By removing these limitations and allowing military health care professionals to provide care across states borders, irrespective of whether they are physically located at a federal facility, the law affords the military health system increased agility to provide specialty care to our Service members using new technologies in electronic health (E-Health) and Telemedicine. Section 713 of the NDAA for Fiscal Year 2012 was intended to remove restrictions in order to make the implementation and integration of these advances in new medical technology possible in the Military Health System. With this in mind, it is vital that any programs implementing Section 713 optimize the use of TRICARE providers, across the full Military Health System, to enhance access to care.

By expanding the definition of health care professionals eligible for this exemption, Section 713 provides broad discretion to the DoD for implementation, without additional limiting restrictions, in order to better facilitate the inclusion of more health care professionals to fill shortages in key areas and specialties, especially in behavioral health. The expansive authority provided to implement these programs was intentional, and concurrent with existing authorization and programs.

Licensing and credentialing of health care professionals remains an essential requirement, and it is vital that the DoD remain committed to meticulous standards in order to ensure the best level of care. The DoD must also clearly delineate that health care professionals are only eligible to use the exemption while working on patients authorized within the scope of authorized DoD duties and procedures, per the

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underlying language and intent of Section 713. Furthermore, codification of Section 713 will allow for active duty military on leave, in rural America, to access the same level of care from their home setting as they would on base. National Guard and Reserves will have the military's attentive care immediately, when the problem first arises, without the hindrance or time delay that geographic location may add.

The recent release of the DoD/Veteran's Affairs (VA) Joint Strategic Plan for Fiscal Years 2011-2013 highlights many of the goals proper implementation of Section 713 can achieve. For example, included in the Goal 2: Health Care section, it is clearly stated that DoD/VA "... improve access, quality, effectiveness, and efficiency of health care for Service Members, Veterans, and their beneficiaries" through major collaborative efforts on "Integrated Mental Health Strategy, Health Information Sharing, and Expanded Telehealth" initiatives. Accordingly, it is important that DoD and VA collaborate and coordinate through implementation of Section 713 to ensure the intent of the law is reached, and that there are compatible technology/systems and a seamless transition.

As DoD continues reviewing the law, I offer my assistance and remain committed to ensuring the full intent of the law is reached. Thank you for your continued support of our men and women in the Armed Services and I look forward to your timely response.

Sincerely,



Glenn 'GT' Thompson
Member of Congress

cc: The Honorable Michèle Flournoy, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy
The Honorable Elizabeth L. King, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Legislative Affairs