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# Naming VA Facilities: Fact Sheet

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## Introduction

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) operates a large number of facilities across its three major administrations: the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), and the National Cemetery Administration (NCA). VHA owns and operates approximately 5,665 buildings and operates another 1,663 leases.<sup>1</sup> VBA operates approximately 217 offices nationwide.<sup>2</sup> NCA operates 155 national cemeteries and 34 soldiers' lots and memorial sites.<sup>3</sup>

VA is restricted by law to naming facilities after the geographic region where they are located.<sup>4</sup> Among Members of Congress, there is often interest in naming VA facilities, such as VA medical centers (VAMCs), hospitals, community-based outpatient clinics (CBOCs), and cemeteries to commemorate specific individuals. Since 1998, this has solely been a congressional prerogative, accomplished through legislation with rules set by the House and Senate Committees on Veterans' Affairs (HVA and SVA, respectively). In the 116<sup>th</sup> Congress, for example, at least 25 bills were introduced with the purpose of renaming a VA facility; seven of those became law. (See this report's "Recent Examples of Legislation" section). This report provides a brief overview of the legal authority for naming facilities, the current process, and recent examples of legislation to name facilities.<sup>5</sup>

## Authority for Naming Facilities

Congress established VA's naming limitations under the Veterans Programs Enhancement Act of 1998 (P.L. 105-368). Under Section 1001 of the act, except as expressly provided by law, a facility, structure, or real property of VA, and a major portion (such as a wing or floor) of any such facility, structure, or real property, may be named by the VA only for the geographic area in which the facility, structure, or real property is located.<sup>6</sup>

Prior to enactment of this law, the VA Secretary's authority to name facilities and the congressional role in the process was less clear. Based on debate included in the *Congressional Record* during consideration of the Veterans Programs Enhancement Act of 1998, then-Secretary of Veterans Affairs Togo West attempted to name a VA cemetery after Abraham Lincoln without congressional approval, which drew disapproval from then-Representative Ray LaHood:

Mr. Speaker, I rise to address the issue of naming VA facilities. This has been a very frustrating problem for me and my constituents, particularly in Springfield, Illinois.

On April 8 of this year, VA's Secretary Togo West issued a press release naming the cemetery-in-progress near Joliet, Illinois the "Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery." In my opinion, Mr. West's office moved unilaterally without any congressional or Committee

<sup>1</sup> Department of Veterans Affairs, *FY2021 Congressional Submission, Budget in Brief*, February 2020, p. BiB-11.

<sup>2</sup> VBA Locations, at <https://www.va.gov/directory/guide/division.asp?dnum=3>.

<sup>3</sup> National Cemetery Administration, "Background about NCA," February 10, 2021, at <https://www.cem.va.gov/resources.asp>. The term soldiers' lots refers to the section of a public or private cemetery reserved for the interment of soldiers. These sections are under the purview of the nearest national cemetery.

<sup>4</sup> 38 U.S.C. §531.

<sup>5</sup> For more information on commemorating individuals in general, see CRS Report R43539, *Commemorations in Congress: Options for Honoring Individuals, Groups, and Events*.

<sup>6</sup> 38 U.S.C. §531.

on Veterans' Affairs input whatsoever, disregarding VA's own policy on naming facilities. Many of my colleagues from down-State Illinois were completely unaware of this.

Congress has well-established procedures for naming facilities of all kinds in honor of individuals. The VA chose to step outside its legal authority, ignoring procedures and precedent. VA's own policy clearly states that the naming of VA facilities in honor of individuals can be done only by congressional mandate.

This situation has me very concerned about the VA's apparent lack of regard for procedures. I am pleased that this legislation we are considering today provides a solution. The VA will no longer be able to sidestep proper procedures in naming facilities. Congress' authority to naming facilities in honor of individuals will be codified and, hopefully, no more confusion will exist.<sup>7</sup>

The VA cemetery was named after Abraham Lincoln. However, since passage of the act, VA has deferred to Congress in the naming of federal property in honor of individuals.

## Facility Naming Rules

The rules for naming VA facilities are set by the House and Senate Committees on Veteran's Affairs (HVAC and SVAC, respectively). At the start of each new Congress, the committees decide their respective committee rules of procedure, which historically include a rule for renaming facilities after a deceased individual.<sup>8</sup> In the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress, both veterans committees' rules outline similar requirements for facility renaming. These rules prohibit naming a VA facility after an individual unless the individual is deceased and is:

- a veteran who (i) was instrumental in the construction of the facility to be named, or (ii) was a recipient of the Medal of Honor, or, as determined by the chairman and ranking minority member, otherwise performed military service of an extraordinarily distinguished character;
- a Member of the U.S. House of Representatives or Senate who had a direct association with such facility;
- an Administrator of Veterans Affairs, a Secretary of Veterans Affairs, a Secretary of Defense or of a service branch, or a military or other federal civilian official of comparable or higher rank; or
- an individual who, as determined by the chairman and ranking minority member, performed outstanding service for veterans.

In addition, each member of the congressional delegation representing the state where the designated facility is located must indicate, in writing, his or her support of the bill. Finally, the pertinent state department or chapter of each congressionally chartered veterans' organization with a national membership of at least 500,000 must indicate, in writing, its support of the bill.

Both committees' rules allow for any of the above criteria to be waived by unanimous consent.

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<sup>7</sup> Rep. Ray H. LaHood, "Veterans' Benefits Enhancement Act of 1998," remarks in the House, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 144, part 142 (October 10, 1998), p. H10374.

<sup>8</sup> For the HVAC rules of procedure, see <https://veterans.house.gov/imo/media/doc/2021.02.17%20House%20Veterans%20Affairs%20Committee%20117th%20Rules.pdf>. The SVAC rules of procedure are available through SVAC and interested staff should contact the committee.

## Recent Examples of Legislation

Legislation to name VA facilities is frequently considered in Congress. Typically, legislation to name VA facilities to commemorate an individual highlights the individual's accomplishments that merit such an honor in the legislative text. In addition, the legislative text identifies the location of the facility and the new name (see text box for a detailed example).

### Selected Example of Enacted Legislation

To designate the Manhattan Campus of the New York Harbor Health Care System of the Department of Veterans Affairs as the "Margaret Cochran Corbin Campus of the New York Harbor Health Care System." (P.L. 116-331)

The first clause includes findings, which briefly describe Margaret Cochran Corbin's life, including her ties to the area in which the facility is located:

- (1) Margaret Cochran was born in Franklin County, Pennsylvania, on November 12, 1751, and married John Corbin in 1772.
- (2) Three years after the marriage, when John Corbin left to fight in the Revolutionary War as an artilleryman, Margaret Corbin accompanied him to war to support the Revolutionary Army.
- (3) Margaret Corbin supported the Revolutionary Army by caring for injured and sick soldiers as well as by cooking and cleaning. During battle, she also helped her husband load the cannon he was responsible for manning.
- (4) On November 16, 1776, John Corbin was manning a cannon during the Battle of Fort Mifflin on Red Bank, Pennsylvania, when he was killed. Margaret Corbin heroically took her husband's place, firing the cannon until she, too, was hit by enemy fire and seriously wounded.
- (5) Having lost the use of her left arm, Margaret Corbin was assigned to the "Invalid Regiment" at West Point, New York.
- (6) The Continental Congress awarded Margaret Corbin a lifelong pension for her injuries, making her the first woman to receive a pension from the United States by virtue of military service for the United States.
- (7) Margaret Corbin died in 1789 in Highland Falls, New York. She is honored nearby at West Point as a hero of the Revolutionary War.

The second clause identifies the facility to be named after the individual and specifies the name:

The Manhattan Campus of the New York Harbor Health Care System of the Department of Veterans Affairs in New York, New York, shall after the date of the enactment of this Act be known and designated as the "Margaret Cochran Corbin Campus of the New York Harbor Health Care System" or the "Margaret Cochran Corbin VA Campus".

The third clause specifies that any reference in any law, regulation, map, document, paper, or other record of the United States to the facility shall be deemed to be a reference to the new name.

Some of the most recent examples from the 117<sup>th</sup> and 116<sup>th</sup> Congresses are listed below. This is not a comprehensive list. This list also includes resolutions expressing support for facility names; unlike bills, such resolutions do not authorize facilities to be designated by particular names.

### 117<sup>th</sup> Congress

H.Res. 50, Expressing the support of the House of Representatives for the naming of new or undedicated facilities of the Department of Veterans Affairs after women veterans and minority veterans in order to reflect the diversity of all who have served in the Armed Forces of the United State.

H.R. 1281, To name the Department of Veterans Affairs community-based outpatient clinic in Gaylord, Michigan, as the "Navy Corpsman Steve Andrews Department of Veterans Affairs Health Care Clinic."

## **116<sup>th</sup> Congress**

### **Enacted Legislation**

P.L. 116-10/H.R. 54/S. 49, A bill to designate the outstation of the Department of Veterans Affairs in North Ogden, Utah, as the Major Brent Taylor Vet Center Outstation.

P.L. 116-87/H.R. 2334 /S. 1635, A bill to designate the Department of Veterans Affairs community-based outpatient clinic in Odessa, Texas, as the “Wilson and Young Medal of Honor VA Clinic.”

P.L. 116-168/H.R. 2948/S. 1646, A bill to designate the community-based outpatient clinic of the Department of Veterans Affairs in St. Augustine, Florida, as the “Leo C. Chase Jr. Department of Veterans Affairs Clinic.”

P.L. 116-169/H.R. 7379/S. 4072, A bill to designate the clinic of the Department of Veterans Affairs in Bend, Oregon, as the “Robert D. Maxwell Department of Veterans Affairs Clinic.”

P.L. 116-262/H.R. 1918/S. 900, A bill to designate the community-based outpatient clinic of the Department of Veterans Affairs in Bozeman, Montana, as the “Travis W. Atkins Department of Veterans Affairs Clinic.”

P.L. 116-295/H.R. 4983/S. 2795, A bill to designate the Department of Veterans Affairs community-based outpatient clinic in Gilbert, Arizona, as the “Staff Sergeant Alexander W. Conrad Veterans Affairs Health Care Clinic.”

P.L. 116-297/H.R. 5023, A bill to name the Department of Veterans Affairs community-based outpatient clinic in Youngstown, Ohio, as the “Carl Nunziato VA Clinic.”

P.L. 116-317/H.R. 7347/S. 4070, A bill to designate the medical center of the Department of Veterans Affairs in Ann Arbor, Michigan, as the “Lieutenant Colonel Charles S. Kettles Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center.”

P.L. 116-331/H.R. 1925/ S. 898, A bill to designate the Manhattan Campus of the New York Harbor Health Care System of the Department of Veterans Affairs as the “Margaret Cochran Corbin Campus of the New York Harbor Health Care System.”

### **Introduced Legislation**

H.R. 685, A bill to name the Department of Veterans Affairs community-based outpatient clinic in Bend, Oregon, as the “Robert Maxwell VA Clinic” (Related to P.L. 116-169).

H.R. 1341, A bill to designate the Mental Health Residential Rehabilitation Treatment Facility Expansion of the Department of Veterans Affairs Alvin C. York Medical Center in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, as the “Sergeant John Toombs Residential Rehabilitation Treatment Facility.”

H.R. 4042, A bill to designate the Department of Veterans Affairs community clinic in New City, New York, as the “Jerry Donnellan VA Community Clinic.”

H.R. 4969, Las Cruces Bataan Memorial Clinic Act.

H.R. 8195, A bill to name the Department of Veterans Affairs community-based outpatient clinic, located at 400 College Drive, Middleburg, Florida, the “A.K. Baker VA Clinic.”

H.Res. 1213, Expressing the support of the House of Representatives for the naming of new or undedicated facilities of the Department of Veterans Affairs after women veterans and minority veterans in order to reflect the diversity of all who have served in the Armed Forces of the United States.

S. 2823, Las Cruces Bataan Memorial Clinic Act.

S. 4531, A bill to designate the community-based outpatient clinic of the Department of Veterans Affairs, located at 400 College Drive, Middleburg, Florida, the “Andrew K. Baker Department of Veterans Affairs Clinic,” and for other purposes.

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