

Naming VA Facilities

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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 5,646 buildings and operates another 1,726 leases.¹ VBA operates approximately 217 offices nationwide.² NCA operates 155 national cemeteries and 34 soldiers' lots and memorial sites.³

Under current law, VA is restricted by law to naming facilities for the geographic region where the facilities are located.⁴ For instance, the VA Medical Center in Washington, DC, is named the "Washington DC VA Medical Center." VA cannot name the facility for an individual without an act of Congress requiring such name change.

Among Members of Congress, there is often interest in naming VA facilities, such as VA medical centers (VAMCs), hospitals, community-based outpatient clinics (CBOCs), regional offices, and cemeteries to commemorate specific individuals.⁵ 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 117th Congress, for example, at least 31 bills were introduced with the purpose of renaming a VA facility; seven of those became law as of December 7, 2022. (See this report's "Recent Examples of Legislation" section). This report provides a brief overview of the legal authority for naming VA facilities, the current process, and recent examples of legislation to name facilities.⁶

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.⁷

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

¹ Department of Veterans Affairs, *FY2023 Congressional Submission, Budget in Brief*, March 2022, p. BiB-21.

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

³ 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.

⁴ 38 U.S.C. §531.

⁵ 38 C.F.R. §38.602 provides the Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs with the responsibility of naming features within national cemeteries. The Under Secretary can name features after historically notable persons, places, or events, in addition to geographic locations. For more information, see CRS Report R46813, *Department of Veterans Affairs: Burial Benefits and the National Cemetery Administration*.

⁶ For more information on commemorating individuals in general, see CRS Report R43539, *Commemorations in Congress: Options for Honoring Individuals, Groups, and Events*.

⁷ 38 U.S.C. §531.

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 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.⁸

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

Transferring Facility Names

The Veterans Programs Enhancement Act of 1998 did not grant VA the authority to transfer the name of a facility to another facility. For instance, if VA replaced an aging facility that was already named after an individual via congressional action, the department was limited to naming the new facility for the geographic location of the facility only. The 117th Congress enacted legislation amending 38 U.S.C. §531 to allow such a name transfer.⁹

The Secretary is now authorized to transfer the name of a property if

- the original property was designated with that name by law;
- the department no longer offers benefits or services at the original covered property;
- the other property is similar in type and purpose to the original named property; and
- the other property is located at a different location or address but within the same area (i.e., town, city, or other local government area) that was specified in the law that named the original facility.

The Secretary is required to notify the committees of jurisdiction and each member of Congress representing the state in which the original property and the other property are located of the intent to transfer the name.

⁸ 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.

⁹ P.L. 117-137.

Facility Naming Rules

The rules for naming VA facilities are set by the HVAC and SVAC. 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.¹⁰ In the 117th 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 (1) was instrumental in the construction of the facility to be named, or (2) 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.¹¹

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

¹⁰ For the HVAC rules of procedure, see <https://veterans.house.gov/imo/media/doc/2021.02.17%20House%20Veterans%20Affairs%20Committee%20117th%20Rules.pdf>. For the SVAC rules of procedure, see <https://www.veterans.senate.gov/committee-rules>

¹¹ For more information on congressionally chartered veterans organizations, see CRS Report R47236, *Title 36 Charters: The History and Evolution of Congressional Practices*.

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 clinic of the Department of Veterans Affairs in Mishawaka, Indiana, as the "Jackie Walorski VA Clinic." (P.L. 117-179)

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

- (1) Jackie Walorski was born August 17, 1963, in South Bend, Indiana.
- (2) Jackie Walorski grew up in South Bend raised by her parents, Martha, who worked at a local grocery store, and Raymond, an Air Force veteran and firefighter who owned an appliance store.
- (3) Jackie Walorski graduated from James Whitcomb Riley High School in 1981 and is an alumna of Taylor University.
- (4) Upon her graduation, Jackie Walorski worked as a reporter for a television station in South Bend and later worked for local chapters of the Humane Society and Chamber of Commerce as well as served as a development officer for area universities.
- (5) In 2000, she and her husband Dean Swihart moved to Romania and founded Impact International, a nonprofit foundation that provided medical supplies and attention to impoverished children while they served as missionaries there for four years.
- (6) In 2004, she was elected to the Indiana House of Representatives and subsequently reelected to that office every two years where she served three full terms in office.
- (7) In 2012, she was elected to the United States House of Representatives and subsequently reelected to that office until her death in a tragic car accident in 2022.
- (8) During her service in the United States House of Representatives, she was a passionate advocate for all her constituents, but especially veterans in the area.
- (9) During her service in the United States House of Representatives, she served on the Committee on Veterans' Affairs for two terms, during that time authoring the Veterans Mobility Safety Act of 2016 (Public Law 114-256).
- (10) In 2017, through her persistent advocacy for area veterans, the Department of Veterans Affairs completed construction of a medical clinic in St. Joseph County, Indiana, to meet the needs of Michiana area veterans.

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

The clinic of the Department of Veterans Affairs located in Mishawaka, Indiana, shall after the date of the enactment of this Act be known and designated as the "Jackie Walorski VA Clinic."

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 of VA naming legislation from the 117th and 116th Congresses are listed below. These include resolutions expressing support for facility names; unlike bills, such resolutions do not authorize facilities to be designated by particular names. Enacted legislation is listed first, followed by introduced legislation. These lists are not comprehensive.

117th Congress

Enacted Legislation

P.L. 117-56, To name the Department of Veterans Affairs community-based outpatient clinic in Columbus, Georgia, as the Robert S. Poydasheff VA Clinic.

P.L. 117-57, To name the Department of Veterans Affairs community-based outpatient clinic in Aurora, Colorado, as the Lieutenant Colonel John W. Mosley VA Clinic.

P.L. 117-89, 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.

P.L. 117-98, To designate the medical center of the Department of Veterans Affairs in San Diego, California, as the Jennifer Moreno Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center, and to support the designation of a component of such medical center in honor of Kathleen Bruyere.

P.L. 117-131, A bill to designate the community-based outpatient clinic of the Department of Veterans Affairs planned to be built in Oahu, Hawaii, as the “Daniel Kahikina Akaka Department of Veterans Affairs Community-Based Outpatient Clinic.”

P.L. 117-134, A bill to rename the Provo Veterans Center in Orem, Utah, as the “Col. Gail S. Halvorsen ‘Candy Bomber’ Veterans Center.”

P.L. 117-179, To designate the clinic of the Department of Veterans Affairs in Mishawaka, Indiana, as the “Jackie Walorski VA Clinic.”

P.L. 117-199, To designate the outpatient clinic of the Department of Veterans Affairs in Ventura, California, as the “Captain Rosemary Bryant Mariner Outpatient Clinic.”

P.L. 117-208, A bill to designate the community-based outpatient clinic of the Department of Veterans Affairs in San Angelo, Texas, as the “Colonel Charles and JoAnne Powell Department of Veterans Affairs Clinic.”

P.L. 117-227, Senator Johnny Isakson VA Regional Office Act of 2022.

Introduced Legislation

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.”

H.R. 1737, 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. 1960, 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.R. 4787, To rename the Provo Veterans Center in Orem, Utah, as the “Gail S. Halvorsen ‘Candy Bomber’ Veterans Center.”

H.R. 5481, To name the Department of Veterans Affairs community-based outpatient clinic in Forest City, North Carolina, as the “Master Sergeant Jerry K. Crump VA Clinic.”

H.R. 5579, Jerry Lewis VA Clinic Act.

H.R. 5929, Las Cruces Bataan Memorial Clinic Act.

H.R. 5943, To designate the outpatient clinic of the Department of Veterans Affairs in Greenville, South Carolina, as the “Lance Corporal Dana Cornell Darnell Outpatient Clinic.”

H.R. 6244/S. 3369, Max Cleland VA Medical Center Act.

H.R. 6313, To designate the Department of Veterans Affairs community-based outpatient clinic in French Camp, California, as the “Richard A. Pittman Department of Veterans Affairs Health Care Clinic.”

H.R. 6722, To designate the Department of Veterans Affairs community-based outpatient clinic in French Camp, California, as the “Richard A. Pittman VA Clinic.”

H.R. 6863, To designate the medical center of the Department of Veterans Affairs in Memphis, Tennessee, as the “Lt. Col. Luke Weathers, Jr. VA Medical Center.”

H.R. 7903, To designate the Department of Veterans Affairs community-based outpatient clinic located in Canton, Michigan, as the “Major General Oliver W. Dillard VA Clinic.”

H.R. 7925, To designate the Department of Veterans Affairs community-based outpatient clinic located in Palm Desert, California, as the “Sy Kaplan VA Clinic.”

H.R. 7944, To name the Department of Veterans Affairs community-based outpatient clinic to be constructed in Toms River, New Jersey, the Leonard G. ‘Bud’ Lomell, Jr. VA Clinic, and for other purposes.

H.R. 9237, To name the Department of Veterans Affairs community-based outpatient clinic in Vallejo, California, as the “Delphine Metcalf-Foster VA Clinic.”

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 States.

S. 1803, A bill to designate the community-based outpatient clinic of the Department of Veterans Affairs in Columbus, Georgia, as the “Robert S. Poydasheff Department of Veterans Affairs Clinic.”

S. 2159, A bill to designate the community-based outpatient clinic of the Department of Veterans Affairs located at 400 College Drive, Middleburg, Florida, as the “Andrew K. Baker Department of Veterans Affairs Clinic”, and for other purposes.

S. 3376, A bill to designate the outpatient clinic of the Department of Veterans Affairs in Greenville, South Carolina, as the “Lance Corporal Dana Cornell Darnell Department of Veterans Affairs Outpatient Clinic.”

S. 4797, A bill to designate the clinic of the Department of Veterans Affairs in Mishawaka, Indiana, as the “Jackie Walorski VA Clinic.”

S. 5016, Colonel Mary Louise Rasmuson Campus of the Alaska VA Healthcare System Act of 2022.

116th Congress

Enacted Legislation

P.L. 116-10, 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, 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, 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, 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, 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, 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, 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, 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, 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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