

Senator Heitkamp's Connect with Veterans Act

The goal of Senator Heitkamp's Connect with Veterans Act is to better connect veterans with existing services and benefits from the wide variety of local, state and federal agencies which offer programs directed to veterans. The bill does this by creating a database of contact information for newly-separated veterans and allows communities, as well as the Department of Veterans Affairs and state Departments of Veterans Affairs, to obtain the information to better connect with veterans.

Senator Heitkamp has heard from too many veterans about many of the challenges they face in getting access to needed services and benefits, such as employment or education assistance or access to health care. Currently, there is no mechanism for local governments and communities to interact directly with transitioning servicemembers, veterans, and their families who plan to relocate there.

By giving veterans an opportunity to share their contact information, Senator Heitkamp's bill would help towns, counties and tribes in North Dakota, and across the country, interact more with new veterans moving to these communities. The bill would make it easier for communities to contact veterans with specific information about local communities, such as the hours health care facilities are open, or if the community has a unique family support program. And the program the bill would create could be invaluable if companies are specifically looking to hire veterans. Senator Heitkamp's bill also leaves control of what information is provided to veterans in the hands of local communities, and participation by veterans and communities is completely voluntary. The veterans' personal information will be kept safe and secure throughout. The bill is endorsed by Association of Defense Communities and National Association of Counties.

Organization of the program: Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) would have primary responsibility for the program. However, the Department of Defense has a critical role in the separation process of servicemembers and will be involved in the program as well.

The program would be organized as follows:

- Department of Defense provides all separating servicemembers an opportunity to request their contact information of where they will live after separation be shared with:
 - Federal Department of Veterans Affairs
 - State Department of Veterans Affairs
 - The city or county they will reside in
- The Department of Defense will describe the types of information that will be shared and with whom – reassuring servicemembers that their personal information will be protected.
- The Department of Defense transmits the contact information for program participants to the VA, which takes custody of the contact information in a secure database.
- In order for cities and counties to receive the information, they must make a request to the VA.
- Once they receive the information, the city and/or county can work with outside groups, such as veterans service organizations or military community groups, to provide the new veteran with important and useful information about living in that community.
- The VA maintains the database and develops a system where veterans can update their information (triggering another sharing of contact information) or request that their information be deleted from the database.