

TELEGRAPH EDITORIAL

Veterans should all be honored

On the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month in 1918, the hostilities that made up World War I came to an end when an armistice with Germany went into effect.

World War I was called “the War to End All Wars.”

It wasn’t, of course, but the end of that war – which resulted in the deaths of 17 million people – was the genesis for our Veterans Day holiday.

It was originally called Armistice Day, and President Woodrow Wilson issued the first proclamation in November 1919: “To us in America,

the reflections of Armistice Day will be filled with solemn pride in the heroism of those who died in the country’s service and with gratitude for the victory, both because of the thing from which it has freed us and because of the opportunity it has given America to show her sympathy with peace and justice in the councils of the nations.”

In 1926, Congress passed a resolution “inviting the people of the United States to observe the day in schools and churches, or other suitable places, with appropriate ceremonies of friendly relations with all other peoples.” The resolution also noted that 27 of the 48 states had already declared Nov. 11 a state holiday.

It took another dozen years for Congress to make it an official federal holiday, and President Dwight Eisenhower signed a law in 1954 changing Armistice Day to Veterans Day to honor all veterans.

It is a time for patriotism and to mark the special con-

tribution that veterans have made to this country. Flags are hung, parades are held, and the day affords us the opportunity to reflect on how fortunate we are to have such brave men and women in our armed forces who have answered their country’s call through the years.

Some people think it’s important to point out the distinction between Veterans Day – when we honor those who have worn and are now wearing our country’s uniform – and Memorial Day, when we remember those who gave their lives in service to their country.

We think it’s largely a distinction without a difference. We should honor all veterans on Veterans Day, including those who died defending our country, just as we should on Memorial Day also remember those veterans who fought alongside those who died.

It’s hardly a distinction worth fighting over.

As much as we might like to think of Veterans Day as an American holiday, we like the fact that we’re not the only ones who use Nov. 11 to pay tribute to the accomplishments and sacrifices of veterans.

In France, Belgium, England and many of the places that made up what was once the British empire – including Canada and India – they observe Remembrance Day or Armistice Day on Nov. 11.

It’s worth keeping in mind that every country has its share of men and women who have worn their country’s uniform.

You might even say it’s one of the best things we have in common.

Difference between Veterans and Memorial days isn’t worth fighting over.

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VISUAL VIEWPOINT



GUEST COMMENTARY

Treatment, not jail, for veterans

Veterans | ‘Never leave a warrior behind’ is true in a war zone, and it should be back home.

The brave men and women of our Armed Forces never fail our nation in battle, and we have a

duty not to fail them after they re-enter civilian life. In particular, we must not fail those who come home and become involved with the criminal justice system. Many of these veterans need treatment, not incarceration. The good news is that a grassroots movement across America has given rise to more than 200 Veterans Treatment Courts designed to give justice-involved veterans a better way forward.

One defendant before a Veterans Treatment Court was “Alison,” an Afghanistan war veteran from Grafton County. After leaving military service, she experienced acute onset of schizophrenia, which went undiagnosed and untreated. One day, her car veered off the road and became stuck in a snowbank. Police arrived to assist, but Alison flashed back to Afghanistan and believed they were a threat to her. She became belligerent and was charged with assaulting a police officer and resisting arrest. But instead of being tried and jailed, she was referred to a Veterans Treatment Court where a specialist from the VA in White River Junction, Vt., worked with the court to arrange an array of services, including psychiatric assistance, medication monitoring and employment assistance. Alison signed a contract, agreeing to receive mental health treatment for at least a year and to be monitored by the court. Nearly a year later, Alison has

“graduated” from the program, continues to receive treatment and has not re-entered the criminal justice system.

Since the first Veterans Treatment Court was established in 2008, they have evolved into “one-stop shops” linking veterans with the full array of programs, services and benefits that they have earned. The indispensable

player in each court is the Veterans Justice Outreach specialist, or VJO, an employee of the US Department of Veterans Affairs. The VJO acts as a resource for the court, advocating for veterans who are pre-trial criminal defendants by explaining to prosecutors and judges what services the VA can provide as an alternative to jail. The VJO is a constant presence during court proceedings, often with a laptop computer for accessing VA medical records and enrolling veteran-defendants in treatment programs on the spot. They also travel across their regions to train police and court personnel to recognize the reintegration challenges associated with military service, especially combat service. “I feel like I have the best job at the VA,” said Diane Levesque, the VJO based in Manchester. “It’s energizing, and everyone is very appreciative of what I do – the vets, the lawyers, and the judges.”

However, the Veterans Justice Outreach program faces an uncertain future. It was created by the VA as an innovative way to address the crisis of countless thousands of veterans, especially those with PTSD and substance abuse issues, who were being locked up and denied treatment. However, this is an ad hoc program with no clear legislative authorization. A new President or VA secretary could abruptly cancel it.

This is why I have introduced the bipartisan Veterans Justice

Outreach Act, which would recognize the VA’s authority to work with veterans prior to incarceration and would recognize in the U.S. Code the ongoing work of VJOs in all 50 states. This would give permanence and stature to the Veterans Justice Outreach program. And as hundreds more Veterans Treatment Courts are established in the years ahead, creating the need for additional VJOs, this law would boost the program’s clout in the annual competition for funding within the VA budget.

One reason for the effectiveness of Veterans Treatment Courts is that they echo aspects of military culture. They allow veteran-defendants to participate in the court process with volunteer veteran-mentors and VA professionals, re-instilling a sense of military camaraderie. In effect, the court is like a military unit: the judge is like a commanding officer; the peer-mentors are like fire-team leaders; the VJO takes the point position; and the veteran-defendant becomes a soldier with orders to carry out – for example, a treatment program and regular reports back to the court. As with a military unit, Veteran Treatment Courts develop a strong esprit de corps – everyone knows they are doing important, often life-changing work for veterans.

It is a sacrosanct principle, instilled in members of our Armed Forces: Never leave a warrior behind on the battlefield. This is true in a war zone, and it should be true in the battles that some veterans face after they return to civilian life. Those who have run-ins with the law deserve treatment, not incarceration. They also need the intervention of skilled, caring Veterans Justice Outreach specialists. It’s time for Congress to recognize in law the vital role of VJOs in securing justice for our veterans.

Jeanne Shaheen is a U.S. senator from New Hampshire.



SEN. JEANNE SHAHEEN

GUEST COMMENTARY

Veterans Administration is crisis Hillary Clinton can’t ignore

Veterans Day is a chance to honor the 114,000 New Hampshire men and women who put their lives on the line for our freedom. It’s also a chance to reflect on the challenges they face here at home. Chief among them is the ongoing crisis at the Department of Veterans Affairs, which in many respects has only worsened since it made national headlines last year.

Unfortunately, the leading Democratic presidential candidate – Hillary Clinton – refuses to even admit such a crisis exists. Two weeks ago, she claimed the VA’s problems haven’t been “as widespread as they’ve been made out to be.” She even tried to speak for the veteran community, claiming most of us are satisfied with the VA.

As a veteran myself, I wonder whether Mrs. Clinton has picked up a newspaper, turned on the

television, or even so much as spoken to a veteran in the past year. If she had, she would know the crisis at the VA is still ongoing in New Hampshire and across the country.

As Hillary Clinton travels across America, she should examine how long veterans wait for healthcare at their local VA. When she comes to New Hampshire, she’ll see that waits for hundreds of doctors’ appointments in the state VA system still drag out longer than 30 days – a wait the VA calls unacceptable.

Even the VA admits problems are widespread. According to agency officials, excessive waits are up 50 percent across the country since last year’s scandal. If that’s not widespread, I don’t know what is.

Keep in mind: These

wait times cause veterans pain, suffering, and even death. Last year’s scandal left at least 40 veterans dead while being stuck on secret wait lists designed to hide excessive wait times.

The VA’s internal investigation later revealed these waitlists existed nationwide.

That puts Mrs. Clinton’s claim in context. If anything, the VA’s problems are more widespread than they’ve been made out to be.

Her claim that most veterans are happy with the VA is equally out of touch. A recent Gallup Poll showed only 28 percent of Americans approve of the government’s handling of veterans’ issues – down 10 percent from last year when the scandal erupted. And in the wake of that scandal, 50 percent of veterans said they found it

difficult to get care, while 60 percent had lost confidence in the VA.

More important than these statistics are the stories behind them. Hardly a day goes by without a local headline or newscast telling the story of veterans who waited weeks, months or even years before receiving care from the VA – if they received care at all.

When she’s not denying these problems exist, Hillary Clinton blames them on her political rivals. She accuses Republicans of playing budget games with the VA, but its budget has ballooned over the past two administrations – one Republican, one Democrat – and a Republican-controlled Congress passed legislation last year granting the VA emergency funding.

The truth is the VA’s problems are of its own making, and they’ve existed for years. The VA’s inspector general recently revealed



over 307,000 veterans in the agency’s database may have passed away while waiting to enroll in the system. Countless veterans’ lives are on the line.

These problems aren’t isolated or overblown. Veterans in New Hampshire and across America know better – we’re the ones dealing with the VA in our daily lives. This Veterans Day,

we need to ask ourselves a simple question: How can we trust Hillary Clinton to fight for us when she won’t even acknowledge the problems we face?

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GEN. THOMAS MCINERNEY