

[Tampa Tribune](#)

[Published: May 30, 2011](#)

Families and communities across the country gather on Memorial Day to barbecue or hang out by the swimming pool. This year, I hope they also remember those who have given the last full measure of devotion on the field of battle in defense of their country and in support of our nation's greatest gift: freedom.

In all, more than 1 million Americans have died in conflicts, countless have gone missing or been taken prisoners of war, and millions of veterans — more than 25 million alive today and many more who have since left this earth — have faithfully answered the call to serve in order to preserve the freedom and liberty of the United States.

On Memorial Day, we reflect on the ideals and values that our soldiers stood for and died defending. We are reminded that they died so we could live and continue to cherish the things they loved — God, country and family.

One of the best ways to honor their sacrifice is to make certain that we support our current warriors and veterans.

Service members risk their lives for us daily and ask for nothing in return but the benefits they have been promised.

But one of the greatest challenges facing our nation's military today is getting timely and accurate information about the services and benefits available to them.

Whether meeting with veterans in the halls of Congress or here in the Tampa Bay area, I consistently hear the need for better information and resources to help our veterans navigate the myriad benefits and services out there.

Often, my office spends countless hours helping just one veteran get his or her veterans benefits straightened out. Current VA claims backlogs and the mounds of paperwork just to qualify for benefits can be very confusing and intimidating for many of our veterans.

The need for more public awareness about the services and benefits available to help our veterans is a gap that we must close; and one that we can close.

Too often in government, we are confronted with deficiencies in a system that seems impossible to fix. Improving the awareness of information and help for our veterans is something we can fix — together.

Just last week, the U.S. House overwhelmingly passed four pieces of legislation to help and honor veterans of all generations. Legislation included fixes to the Post-9/11 GI Bill to keep student veterans in the school of their choice; a new process for the placement of monuments at Arlington National Cemetery; penalties for small businesses that wrongfully claim veteran-owned status; and reissuing the annual cost-of-living adjustment for veterans and survivors.

After learning of abuses by groups charging veterans money to file claims for benefits they may never receive, I have introduced bipartisan legislation that would make it a misdemeanor to illegally charge veterans for filing a disability claim.

The law clearly states that people cannot charge veterans for filing benefits claims with the Veterans Affairs Department, but unfortunately some fly-by-night groups have discovered there are no repercussions for this unconscionable act. When seeking help, veterans should contact certified veterans service officers.

I have also helped introduce bipartisan legislation to improve rehabilitation services for veterans suffering from traumatic brain injury (TBI). Because of ambiguities in current law, TBI treatment at the Department of Veterans Affairs narrowly focuses TBI care on physical restoration.

We must clarify the definition of rehabilitation so veterans will receive care that adequately addresses their physical and mental health needs, as well as quality of life and prospects for long-term recovery and success.

May we never forget those who have fought and died for our freedom, and may we celebrate the lives of those who have truly made America the land of the free and the home of the brave.

U.S. Rep. Gus Bilirakis, R-Palm Harbor, represents the 9th Congressional District, which includes parts of Hillsborough, Pasco and Pinellas counties. He is the vice chairman of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs.