

Lawmakers seek to lift ban on IVF treatments for veterans

June 17 2016, by Andrew Taylor

Veterans whose injuries have left them unable to conceive children may soon be getting long-sought help as congressional negotiations on legislation funding the Department of Veterans Affairs near a close.

At issue is a Senate-passed measure that would lift a 1992 law that prohibits the VA from paying for infertility treatments, such as [in-vitro fertilization](#). The measure, by Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., enjoys bipartisan support but there appears to be lingering resistance from anti-abortion forces who are opposed because IVF treatments result in the destruction of fertilized embryos.

Though the Pentagon covers infertility treatments such as in-vitro fertilization for active duty personnel at seven hospitals, IVF treatments are banned for those in the VA health care system under a law enacted in 1992.

But thousands of veterans have returned from Iraq and Afghanistan with injuries to their sexual organs, spinal cords or brains that have rendered them unable to conceive a child, prompting veterans groups like the Veterans of Foreign Wars and Disabled American Veterans to press to lift the law. Murray has drafted legislation to permanently lift the ban but has been stymied in the Veterans Affairs Committee after Republicans indicated they would offer controversial abortion-related amendments.

Instead, the provision under consideration would lift the ban for two

years and provide \$88 million to fund the treatments over that span.

Murray won a bipartisan 23-7 vote on her measure at a Senate Appropriations panel session in April that included support from powerful Republicans such as Majority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky and Appropriations Chairman Thad Cochran of Mississippi. The Senate later passed the VA funding bill, which also includes \$1.1 billion to battle the Zika virus, by a sweeping 89-8 vote.

"This issue shouldn't be about politics. It shouldn't be about partisanship," Murray said at the time. "And we shouldn't cut corners when it comes to our veterans and their families. This is a chance to support our veterans."

Despite widespread backing in the Senate, House negotiators have yet to agree to Murray's measure, Sen. Barbara Mikulski of Maryland, the top Democrat on the Appropriations Committee, said at a Wednesday meeting of House and Senate negotiators on the measure. While in-vitro fertilization can cost \$20,000 or more, other treatments such as sophisticated artificial limbs, can cost even more.

"This is a widely used medical procedure that vets should have access to," Mikulski said. "The VA provides treatments for other injuries sustained in war—infertility treatments should be no different."

It's unclear how the issue will be resolved next week, when negotiators promise to produce an agreement. There may be some reluctance by lawmakers on Capitol Hill's Veterans Affairs committees to cede their turf. And Murray has tried for years to pass the measure only to come up empty in the face of anti-abortion forces and lawmakers concerned about cost.

On the other hand, wounded [veterans](#) elicit sympathy and support in

Congress, especially during election years. And the profile of the issue has been raised this year, in part because the VA funding measure is advancing as a stand-alone bill—along with the Zika funding—instead of being buried inside an omnibus spending measure.

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