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TOM CRANN: It's all *Things Considered* from Minnesota Public Radio news. I'm Tom Crann. President Obama signed the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act into law this afternoon. Representative Tim Walz sponsored the act in the House. And it's path to the president was not a completely straight one. We've checked in with Congressman Walz about its progress twice before, when it finally passed the House in December and again when it failed to get out of the Senate the following week. But now we've reached him in Washington, in a taxi, on the way back from the White House, actually, right after the signing ceremony. It's good to speak with you again. We got Congressman Walz. Thanks for joining us.

TIM WALZ: Well, thanks, Tom. And thanks for covering this.

TOM CRANN: Is this more satisfying for you now, given the hurdles that this bill went through?

TIM WALZ: I was thinking about this. I think that I'm gratified it got done. I kind of feel that there shouldn't be any pats on the back for things that you're supposed to do. And I kind of felt like this was one that we felt all along was the right thing to do. We had done it right. We built the coalition, and unfortunately had it derailed there at the final hour. So it's gratifying. It was especially so. Clay's parents were there today. And to see them channel their grief into something so positive, that certainly is gratifying. So I'm glad it's done. But as I said back then, it wasn't hyperbole. We just can't wait another day. We got to get busy trying to find new solutions.

TOM CRANN: At the end of the year, at the end of the last congress, we talked to you and you said it would have to be reintroduced, and as it was. But did it proceed more quickly than you expected this time?

TIM WALZ: I was hoping for-- I said, when someone said, this is only the second piece that's been signed this year after the Terrorism Insurance bill, that is quite an achievement. But I think the one thing that the frustration and that happened because of the Senate derailing it at the last minute, actually built up quite a bit of momentum. And it was a gratifying feeling in the room.

I think, for a lot of people there, not just because of the substance of the bill, which is important, but to show that we can get things done, and that it wasn't-- this wasn't even bipartisan, it was nonpartisan. And so it's pretty fast. I think being a minority member in the House to get something signed into law this quickly is pretty amazing. But I think that speaks more to the topic and the commitment and what folks really want to see us do.

TOM CRANN: So let's talk about the Suicide Prevention Act and what it does. The Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Bob McDonald said today, posted on his blog, that it complements the VA's ongoing, multifaceted efforts to improve mental health care for our nation's veterans. Is there a bit of spin there? How do you assess the VA's efforts on this issue?

TIM WALZ: Yeah, no, I think that's pretty fair. I think there's certainly-- and I've said this all along, Tom, it's not for lack of effort at the VA for trying to get this right or the care that those providers want to give. It's just that it appears to be so scattershot. And what we were hearing from families and from veterans is, it's just not convenient and working.

And I think that in itself, the commitment of the Secretary to work with this and get this, that is gratifying because sometimes there's a little territorial on how things work. They did not do that. And so I think that's fair. We asked them to evaluate. We're going to have third-party eyes look at it. If their programs are not working, we're going to change them. If they are, we're going to beef them up. And I think that in the part is he's right. And there's things over there that are working. The question many times is, are the veterans getting to those programs? And the answer too often is no.

TOM CRANN: What do you think the one major change, the one major thing that will happen, or the change we'll see now because of the president signing this bill today?

TIM WALZ: Well, my hope is, again, as I said, I want to see this as a beginning, that the focus on mental health and mental health care, with some of the newest data we're getting, stays at the forefront. Because these are things that are-- it's just unacceptable to lose people to this. All the advances that we're making, we need to apply them. So I think the biggest thing may be cultural.

I certainly can't make guarantees that this bill alone, it certainly won't change it for everyone. But I do think it starts to change that culture. It starts to ask VA to be a little more willing. And as the president stated today, this is not a problem that government is going to solve alone. And that's why this bill asks and does a lot with community providers in connecting with things that are out there. So I think it's a much more broad approach to it.

TOM CRANN: Moving forward, how do you measure the success of this bill? What will it look like for you?

TIM WALZ: Well, I think, first of all, we get some feedback on what's happening with their programs. And we get that third-party audit, if you will. And then, I think, most importantly, we start hearing back from the front-line folks in the veteran service organizations and from the veterans themselves, are they feel like they're being heard? Are they able-- because the problem and the tragedy of Clay Hunt was, Clay knew exactly what was happening to him, and he went to exactly where he should have gone. It simply didn't get-- the care didn't kick in that needed to. So I think we'll start to hear that and hopefully almost immediately.

TOM CRANN: Congressman Tim Walz, a DFLer who represents Minnesota's 1st Congressional District, thank you very much for talking with us about the signing ceremony today. President Obama signed the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act into law.

TIM WALZ: Thanks, Tom.