

## Congressman Wally Herger

### *"Providing for Our Nation's Veterans"* (June 30, 2006)

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As we approach Independence Day, Congress is reaffirming our nation's commitment to care for the veterans who have fought and sacrificed to keep America free.

Rising health care costs are a serious concern for veterans, many of whom need continuing medical treatment for injuries resulting from their military service. With my support, the House of Representatives recently approved the annual funding bill for the VA. It would increase funding for veterans' health care to \$32.7 billion, representing a 58 percent increase since 2001.

Importantly, this measure includes \$2.8 billion for specialty mental health care, such as the treatment of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). It also contains \$25 million to help the military integrate mandatory mental health services and counseling for our active military personnel. While more needs to be done, the measure builds on other recent action to help remove the stigma and confront the profound challenges associated with PTSD.

In addition, Congress recently ended the 100-year-old ban on "concurrent receipt" of military retirement pay and veterans' disability benefits for veterans with the highest level of service-connected disability. Further, Congress has brought more fairness to the benefits paid to surviving dependents of military retirees, and expanded the TRICARE program, the health benefit plan for military beneficiaries, to cover--for the first time--all military retirees and their families. Recently, the House passed legislation to provide a cost of living increase for disabled veterans and their surviving dependents.

Congress is also conducting aggressive oversight to ensure that the VA does a better job of protecting veterans' personal information. The recent theft of personal information of 26.5 million veterans and active-duty military personnel unacceptably jeopardized the privacy of these individuals. This incident highlighted the risk of privacy violations and the need for the VA to implement better protections to prevent similar security failures in the future.

Even as Congress deals with a difficult budget situation, I firmly believe providing effective and high quality care to our nation's veterans should remain one of our highest priorities. These efforts are a fitting tribute of the American people's sincere gratitude to the men and women who have made it possible for America to celebrate its 230th Birthday.