

News from Congressman

Chet Edwards

Chairman, House Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies

Room H-143 The Capitol Washington, DC 20515 Phone: (202) 225-3047
17th District, Texas • 2369 Rayburn Building, Washington, D.C. 20515 (202) 225-6105
Homepage: www.house.gov/edwards



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CONTACT: Josh Taylor

202-225-6105

Edwards: 2009 Veterans, Military Construction Bill Passes House

Respects Service of Troops, Veterans, & Builds on Historic 2008 Funding Increases

(Washington, DC)— U.S. Representative Chet Edwards announced that the House passed its Fiscal Year 2009 Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations bill in a strong bipartisan vote 409 to 4. The 2009 bill builds on the historic increases for veterans and troops passed into law last year, which was the largest funding increase in the 77 year history of the Veterans Administration.

“This bipartisan bill builds on the historic increases in the fiscal year 2008 bill and sends a clear message to America’s troops, veterans, and their families that we honor and respect their service and sacrifice,” said Edwards, Chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction and Veterans Affairs. “This bipartisan bill will also have a positive impact on the quality of care Texas veterans receive in VA hospitals and clinics, including the Waco VA.

“This is about the moral responsibility of keeping our promises to those who have kept their promise to serve. It is about the young father in a wheelchair I met at Walter Reed Army Medical Center just two weeks ago. He lost both of his legs in combat in Iraq. As he sat there talking to me with his young son in his lap, I could not help but be overwhelmed by the lifelong sacrifice this father had made to try to make the world a safer place for my two young sons and children everywhere. This bill is about seeing that that loving father doesn’t have to give up the dreams he has for his child. The humility of this bill is our knowing that we can never fully repay the debt of gratitude we owe this soldier, and all who have served in uniform to protect the American family.

“Honoring our troops, our veterans and their families in a meaningful way is not only the right thing to do. It is the smart thing to do. In an all-volunteer military force, the best in the world, we cannot expect to attract and retain the best and brightest if we do not provide quality housing, health care and education for our military troops and their families and if we do not keep the promises we have made to our veterans.

“The bottom line is this bill is about maintaining a strong national defense, improving military readiness and respecting with word and deeds those who defend us and our freedom,” said Edwards.

The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) said the bill “sends a clear message to America’s veterans, service members and their families that Congress recognizes and appreciates their service to this country and the sacrifices they have made on its behalf. The improvements it would make in troop housing and health care for veterans are much needed and reaffirm that these are truly priorities.”

Overall, the bill totals \$118.7 billion and provides \$72.7 billion in discretionary spending, \$47.7 billion for the Department of Veterans Affairs, \$24.8 billion for Military Construction, Family Housing and BRAC, and \$241 million for related agencies. It is \$3.4 billion more than the President's request and \$8.8 billion more than the historic fiscal year 2008 bill.

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS: \$47.7 billion, \$4.6 billion above 2008 and \$2.9 billion over the President's request, for veterans' medical care, claims processors, and facility improvements. The Veterans Health Administration estimates they will treat more than 5.8 million patients in 2009 including more than 333,275 veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan (40,000 more than 2008). Some notable provisions include:

- **Mental Health Care:** Dedicate a minimum of \$3.8 billion, \$900 million more than 2008, to specialty mental health services for veterans with mental illness, PTSD, and for suicide prevention.
- **Priority 8 Veterans:** \$568 million to increase enrollment of Priority 8 (low to middle income) veterans by 10 percent;
- **Mileage Reimbursement:** Increased funding to raise the gas mileage reimbursement rate from 28.5 cents to 41.5 cents per mile for veterans traveling distances for care, and a freeze on the associated deductible
- **Claims Processors:** Increased funding to hire 2,100 additional claims processors to work down the backlog of 390,000 benefits claims and to reduce the 6 month time to process new claims
- **Rural Veterans:** \$200 million more to provide increased access to local health care providers for veterans and Guard and Reserve members living far away from VA facilities in rural areas
- **Maintenance:** \$300 million more to address the backlog in maintenance at VA medical facilities to prevent another Walter Reed Annex 18 tragedy.
- **Prosthetics:** \$116 million more to increase availability of new generation prosthetics;
- **Research:** \$58 million more for medical research in trauma, traumatic brain injury, mental health and other areas that are critical to finding the best treatments for our Iraq and Afghanistan veterans.
- **Homeless Veterans:** \$130 million to provide the additional case workers and medical services needed for our homeless veterans;
- **Oversight:** Additional \$11 million for the Office of Inspector General to provide additional personnel to inspect the community based outpatient clinics and Vet Centers to avoid a Walter Reed scandal in the VA system.
- **Construction:** Increases Department of Veterans Affairs Construction by \$1 billion above the president's request, which will provide the needed funding for 6 additional major construction projects and an additional 145 minor construction projects that can be completed at VA facilities in fiscal year 2009.

MILITARY CONSTRUCTION: \$24.8 billion, \$400 million above the President's request and \$4.2 billion above 2008. The large increase is mostly due to the costs of implementing Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) and plans to increase the size of the Army and Marine Corps. Some notable provisions include:

- **2005 Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) and Re-stationing:** \$9.1 billion, \$1.8 billion above 2008 and the same as the President's request, to implement base closures and realignments, and support the re-stationing of 70,000 troops and their families from overseas to the United States.
- **Quality of Life Initiative:** \$336 million, not requested by the President, to continue a quality of life initiative for troops and their families started in the 2008 supplemental including: nearly \$200 million for five new trainee and recruit housing facilities for the Army and Marine Corps to improve the barracks soldiers and marines live in when they train; and \$136 million for medical military construction and planning activities to upgrade substandard medical treatment facilities.
- **Growing the Force:** \$5.6 billion in military construction and family housing, to increase the size of the Army by 65,000, the Marine Corps by 27,000, and the Guard and Reserve by 9,200 personnel.
- **Military Housing:** \$3.2 billion, \$300 million above 2008, to further eliminate inadequate military housing.

In his first year as Chairman in 2007, Congressman Edwards authored historic increases of \$11.8 billion in veterans' health care and benefits, the largest increase in veterans funding in the 77-year history of the Veterans Administration.