

News from Congressman

Chet Edwards

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

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Edwards: A New Day for America's Veterans, Democratic Congress Keeps Promises As Historic Funding Increase Becomes Reality

(Washington, DC)— U.S. Representative Chet Edwards (TX17) today hailed the President's release today of \$3.7 billion in additional veterans funding provided by Congress. The \$3.7 billion above the President's budget request for 2008 was designated as emergency funding under the final 2008 appropriations bill authored and passed by the Democratic Congress in December. Overall, the bill increases funding for veterans health care and benefits by \$6.6 billion above the 2007 level, the largest single increase in the 77-year history of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

"This historic funding increase represents a new day for America's veterans and their families, and says clearly to all who have served in uniform that as you have kept your promises to our country, we will keep our promises to you," said Edwards, Chairman of the House Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations Subcommittee.

"For 5.8 million veterans, this new funding means more qualified doctors and nurses to improve medical services. For the 400,000 veterans, including combat wounded vets, who are having to wait too long to have their benefits cases reviewed, this bill means over 1,800 new VA case workers to reduce the unacceptable delays in receiving earned benefits," said Edwards. "For veterans with traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder, mental health care issues, and lost limbs, this bill means renewed hope to rebuild their lives. For many of the 200,000 homeless veterans in America, it means the dignity of not having to sleep on the streets and hope for a better future."

When Democrats took control of Congress in 2007, they made the health care needs of veterans a top priority, and provided \$11.8 billion overall in increased funding for veterans healthcare and benefits programs.

"The Democratic Congress delivered on our promises to America's veterans and their families by enacting a historic increase of \$11.8 billion in our first year on the job, and our veterans have earned every dime of this through their service and sacrifice for country," said Edwards. "Increased funding for veterans is a significant accomplishment, but this isn't about dollars. It's about fulfilling a moral obligation to those who have served. It is about remembering that our veterans' sacrifices don't end after they return home, and neither should our commitment to them. For some, that timely care could be the difference between health and depression, for others, the difference between life and death."

This increase won widespread support and praise from America's leading veterans' organizations including the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Military Officers Association of America, Paralyzed Veterans of America, and Disabled American Veterans.

Key Veterans Accomplishments in the 110th Congress

Historic increases in support for the VA health care system

- \$11.8 billion in increases over 12 months
 - \$3.4 billion increase to FY07 CR
 - \$1.8 billion in Supplemental funding in May 2007 Iraq war spending bill
 - \$6.6 billion increase in FY08 bill (last \$3.7 billion as contingency)
- 30% increase in the VA funding baseline from January 2007 (from \$33.1 billion to \$43.1 billion)
- Other key increases since January 2007 (when the budget was frozen at FY06 levels)
 - Medical Services \$29.1 billion (from \$22.5 billion, a 29% increase)
 - Medical Administration \$3.5 billion (from \$2.9 billion, a 21% increase)
 - Medical Facilities \$4.1 billion (from \$3.3 billion, a 24% increase)
 - Medical Research \$480 million (from \$412 million, a 17% increase)
 - Substance Abuse \$428 million (from \$358 million, a 20% increase)
 - Homeless veterans \$130 million (from \$63.6 million, a 104% increase)

240% increase in non-recurring maintenance at VA facilities since January 2007 to prevent a Walter Reed-like tragedy from occurring there.

- \$415 million in FY 2006, \$1.08 billion in FY 2008 bill.
- VA's Asset Management Plan notes that to adequately maintain the \$40 billion in infrastructure they have, between \$800 million and \$1.6 billion is required annually.

Focusing on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury.

- Required the VA to spend at least \$2.9 billion on mental health care. (In FY06, the requirement was a minimum of \$2.2 billion, making this a 32% increase.)
- Added \$66 million for a new Level 1 Polytrauma Center in San Antonio
- Added \$100 million in the Iraq supplemental (5/07) for mental health care.
- Added \$8 million for additional Polytrauma support clinic teams
- Added \$5.4 million for additional Polytrauma points of contact
- Required that current level I polytrauma centers and the centers of excellence for Mental Health and PTSD will be fully staffed and operational in FY2008

Focusing serious attention on the 400,000 claims backlog by hiring additional claims processors

- Added 3,100 new claims processors to the VA
 - 400 new hires funded through FY07 CR
 - 800 new hires funded through Iraq Supplemental
 - 1,800 new hires funded by FY08 Omnibus
- Projected total claims processors for Compensation and Pension benefits
 - End of year FY07: 9,068
 - End of year FY08: 10,998
- VA projects that even with new employees requiring training time, productivity will increase from 774,378 claims processed in 2006 to 858,906 claims processed in 2008. (84,528 or 11% increase)

Supporting our rural veterans who live far from VA facilities

- Increased the travel reimbursement from 11 cents/mile to 28.5 cents/mile. (First increase since 1979, when gas was 95 cents/gallon.)