

News from Congressman

Chet Edwards

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

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Chairman Edwards: House Passes Record Increases in 2008 Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations Bill That “Honors Promises to America’s Troops & Veterans”

(Washington, DC)— U.S. Representative Chet Edwards (TX17) hailed the record budget increases and strong bipartisan support for H.R 2642, the 2008 Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations bill, which passed the House 409 to 2. Edwards said the bill respects the service and sacrifice of America’s veterans and their families by increasing the VA budget by \$6.7 billion above the 2007 level, the largest single increase in the 77 year history of the Department of Veterans Affairs and \$3.8 billion above the President’s request for fiscal year 2008.

“This bill is about respect and honors the promises made to our veterans with historic increases in funding to provide them the health care and benefits they earned when they put on our nation’s uniform,” said Edwards, the Chairman of the Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations Subcommittee. “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 1100 new VA case workers will reduce the unacceptable delays in receiving earned benefits. This bill also increases the VA’s maintenance and repair budget to prevent a Walter Reed scandal from occurring in the VA system,” said Edwards.

The bill is strongly supported by veterans groups because it exceeds, for the first time, the Independent Budget prepared by veterans’ service organizations by \$294 million. Despite the strong support of veterans groups for the bill, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) at the White House initially issued a veto threat on Edwards’ veterans funding bill, but reversed their decision once it was clear that the bill received strong bipartisan support in Congress.

The bill also provides \$600 million for five polytrauma centers and three “Centers of Excellence” in mental health care, including the Waco VA hospital. Polytrauma is injury to both the brain and other body parts that results in disability.

“This bill will improve our ability to treat veterans suffering from traumatic brain injury, PTSD, and strengthen the mission to make the Waco VA one of the premiere VA Centers of Excellence for mental health research and treatment.”

The bill provides an unprecedented \$21.4 billion for military construction, family housing, and base realignment and closing process known as BRAC, which is fully funded with \$8.2 billion. The total for military construction is an increase of \$207 million over the President's request and \$8.2 billion over 2007, which means better barracks, housing and training facilities when troops return from combat. The bill supports the relocation of 70,000 troops from bases in Korea and Europe to the U.S. Provides funds to grow our military forces and begins the process of adding 65,000 Army, 27,000 Marine, and 9,000 National Guard and Reserve troops.

“This bill allows our servicemen and women to have more effective training facilities, which will save lives and help them carry out their missions. It means our military families, who sacrifice so much for our nation, will have better housing, health care and day care facilities.”

Edwards' bill has been endorsed by several veterans groups such as the Disabled American Veterans (DAV), Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), American Legion, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA), American Veterans (AMVETS), and Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America among many others.

“I believe the National Commander of the Disabled American Veterans, Bradley Barton, went to the heart of what this bill is all about when he said it is, ‘keeping faith with America's veterans’.”

Edwards is Chairman of the House Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations Subcommittee