

# 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  
17<sup>th</sup> District, Texas • 2369 Rayburn Building, Washington, D.C. 20515 (202) 225-6105  
Homepage: [www.house.gov/edwards](http://www.house.gov/edwards)



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**CONTACT: Josh Taylor**

202-225-6105

## **OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN CHET EDWARDS** *Subcommittee Markup of the FY2010 Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations Act* **June 16, 2009**

Good morning. We are here today to mark up the fiscal year 2010 Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations bill. The bill I am pleased to present today continues our unwavering commitment to provide America's servicemen and women with the operational facilities required to do their jobs; the facilities to improve the quality of life for them and their families; and to provide our veterans with quality health care, educational benefits, and other services that support their readjustment into civilian life. This bill shows our appreciation and respect for their service and sacrifices that they have made to protect our nation.

Before I provide an overview of the bill, let me begin by thanking those who have worked hard to bring us to this point. First, I want to thank my ranking member, Mr. Wamp. His insight, leadership, and partnership on this legislation is to be commended. He and I have worked hard to continue the important bipartisan tradition of this subcommittee and I want to both thank him for that and salute him for his personal commitment to our troops, our veterans, and their families.

I want to thank Chairman Obey for his support of this bill and the allocation he gave the subcommittee. He has been a real champion behind the scenes for veterans and our troops over the past three years as Full Committee Chairman. I thank Speaker Pelosi for making funding for veterans and our troops one of her highest priorities. I thank every member of this subcommittee for your active participation in our hearings and for your role in the creation of this bill. I know that the Members of this subcommittee are tireless in their support of our veterans and men and women in uniform. And finally, I thank Mr. Lewis, for the experience and leadership he brings to this, and every appropriations bill.

To prepare for this mark-up, the subcommittee held 18 budget and oversight hearings with 33 witnesses. We also heard from 19 public witnesses who testified on various programs in this bill. This bill builds on the work that we accomplished in the fiscal year 2009 bill and says to all who have served that just as you have kept your promises to this country, we intend to keep our promises to you.

Overall this bill totals \$77.9 billion in discretionary spending for fiscal year 2010, including Overseas Contingency Operations funding. This is \$239 million more than the President's request and \$5.0 billion more than fiscal year 2009. We have reviewed the funding levels of each account carefully to ensure that this

increase is directed to the issues that are most important to those who have offered their lives to protect this nation.

In addition, the bill provides \$48.2 billion in advance appropriations for fiscal year 2011 for three medical accounts of the Department of Veterans Affairs: Medical Services; Medical Support and Compliance; and Medical Facilities. This is an eight percent increase compared to fiscal year 2010 and will provide reliable and timely funding to support the delivery of medical care.

The amount included in this bill provides a fiscal year 2010 current services level for the start of fiscal year 2011. It is intended to give the Administration stability in execution, provide the subcommittee with continued oversight and the ability to address new initiatives, and allow our veterans to have peace of mind when funding bills are delayed. I want to thank Secretary Shinseki for his work in providing the Committee with a proposal that supports this approach.

The fiscal year 2010 recommendation in the bill for Military Construction, Family Housing and BRAC is \$24.6 billion. This funding level fully funds BRAC 2005 at \$7.5 billion, provides an increase of \$140 million for BRAC 1990 to enhance the cleanup of installations closed in prior BRAC rounds, and provides for the modernization of training facilities, as well as the building of child care centers, barracks, and homes. The recommendation reflects the success of the housing privatization program with a reduced need for additional federal funding for family housing construction. It also ensures that our active forces will have a better environment in which to train and operate, as well as an improved quality of life. It also provides funds to support additional requirements for operations in Afghanistan at \$1.4 billion.

This bill includes two major military construction initiatives. First, it provides \$450 million to accelerate the Army's program to modernize troop housing facilities for trainees. Second, the bill provides an additional \$200 million for a Guard and Reserve initiative to address critical unfunded requirements. This funding will go toward critical unfunded requirements for Army and Air National Guard, as well as the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force Reserves.

This bill provides \$53.0 billion in discretionary funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs for fiscal year 2010. This is the same as the President's request and \$5.4 billion more than fiscal year 2009 non-emergency appropriations. This year's budget increase is on top of the unprecedented increase of \$17.7 billion provided over the last two years. Since January 2007, Congress will have increased the baseline for the VA by \$19.9 billion, a 59 percent increase. Within this funding increase, we provide the Veterans Benefits Administration with the resources to hire 1,200 new claims processors that were included in the budget submission.

This increase also provides for an additional \$4.4 billion for the Veterans Health Administration. These funds will allow the Department to increase access to services, ensure safer facilities and improve treatment including:

- \$4.6 billion for mental health services;
- \$3.2 billion for homeless veterans to include the \$26 million for the Presidential Initiative to combat homelessness, \$150 million for the homeless grants and per diem program, and \$20 million for supportive services for low income veterans and families;
- \$580 million for medical research to include a \$48 million increase for research to address the critical needs of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom veterans;
- \$1.1 billion to address the backlog in non-recurring maintenance at our medical facilities; and
- 28 new Vet Centers and 30 new CBOCs.

Additionally, this bill continues the rural health initiative and beneficiary travel rates that we provided last year. Language has been included to continue our oversight of the Veterans Health Administration to ensure that the Department provides funding to the medical facilities in a timely manner, delivers comprehensive

mental health and substance abuse services, and improves the delivery of care to veterans who live in rural areas.

The National Cemetery Administration is funded at \$250 million, an increase of \$20 million above the fiscal year 2009 appropriation and \$8 million above the budget request. With 164 cemeteries in 39 states and Puerto Rico, the Administration has an extensive backlog of maintenance. The increase above the budget request will give the Administration additional resources to improve the appearance and condition of cemeteries as identified in the study on veterans cemeteries which was submitted to the Congress in 2002.

The bill also provides an additional \$19.2 million for the Office of Inspector General, the same as the President's request, to provide additional personnel to accomplish financial audit and increased oversight of medical and information technology programs.

The Committee recommendation includes \$3.3 billion for Information Technology Systems, the same as the budget request. This funding will continue the Department's development of improvements to its electronic health record. Other major programs include development of a new financial management system, paperless benefits processing, and cyber security initiatives. Future adjustments to the program may result from the Department's extensive review of the 280 information technology projects funded in this account.

This bill provides \$1.9 billion for Department of Veterans Affairs construction, \$127 million above the budget request and \$256 million above 2009. The bill will provide needed funding for five ongoing major construction projects, planning and design funding for seven new projects, and funding for approximately 100 minor construction projects that can be completed in fiscal year 2010. By accelerating this construction program, we are able to increase services to our veterans and avoid additional cost increases due to construction inflation.

The Committee recommendation for the four Related Agencies within the bill totals \$282.5 million. This is an increase of \$75.2 million above the fiscal year 2009 appropriation, and an increase of \$6.8 million above the budget request. The increase in funding will enable the Armed Forces Retirement Home to undertake a major capital construction project on its Washington, DC campus as well as begin operations at the Gulfport, Mississippi campus which is being rebuilt from damage it sustained by hurricane Katrina. The increase also provides \$5.3 million for a project at Arlington National Cemetery to relocate power and telephone lines to allow for an additional 8,000 to 10,000 gravesites.

I think this bill does great things to provide for our nation's heroes and I believe we can all be proud to support it.