

# PATTY MURRAY'S WASHINGTON VIEW

U.S. Senator Patty Murray's Weekly Report to the People of Washington – April 28, 2006

## Victory for Veterans

This week, the United States Senate began debate on the Emergency Supplemental Spending bill which pays for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and which this year will also provides funding for the rebuilding of the Gulf Coast. In the three years since the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom, our country and Congress have stood together in staunch support of our men and women in uniform.

Our troops are sacrificing every day on behalf of a grateful nation and the least we can provide are the resources they need to do their jobs safely and effectively. We all want to succeed in our mission in Iraq. We want to achieve our military and policy goals and to bring our troops home safely.

We know that this will require sacrifice and that a U.S. presence will be required for some period of time. But despite these obvious facts, the Administration continues to operate from the pretense that the cost of this ongoing war is unknowable and thus requires emergency spending. It is disingenuous to continue to ask for "emergency" spending to pay for military action that has been ongoing for years. The continued adherence to this policy deliberately misleads the American people about the real costs of war.

One of these real costs of war is the care of our nation's veterans. Our men and women in uniform deserve healthcare, job training and transition assistance – all of the things our country promised them when they volunteered to serve. Despite the increase in veterans coming home from war, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is still not budgeting for these real needs and our veterans are paying the price on waiting lists and in our unemployment lines. In fact, the VA projected that it would treat a total of 110,000 veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan during the current fiscal year, but the VA has already treated 74,000 just this quarter.

Caring for our veterans when they come home is a very real cost of war. That is why along with Senator Danny Akaka (D-HI), I introduced an amendment to the Supplemental bill to add \$430 million to the VA budget. This \$430 million is specifically designed to supplement direct health care, mental health care, and transition assistance services at the VA.

Specifically the **\$430 million** includes:

- **\$80 million** for Vet Centers – the VA's Readjustment Counseling Service
- **\$168 million** for the VA's comprehensive Mental Health Plan; and
- **\$182 million** to deal with existing shortfalls at our VA hospitals and networks

I am pleased to announce that our amendment passed by a vote of 84 to 13.

It was modified to require the President to request and designate the emergency funding. I urge the President to request the emergency aid that those of us who have visited our VA hospitals and spoken with our returning soldiers know that we need. Caring for our veterans when they return home is not just a promise it's our nation's solemn duty.

## Protecting Taxpayer Privacy

In March we learned that the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) is considering altering privacy protections that would allow tax preparers greater freedom to sell taxpayers' personal financial information to third parties. While a firm would need to get a

taxpayer's signature, many Americans may not realize they are signing away their privacy rights.

Having just finished Tax Day, we all know how this works. It's 4 p.m. on April 15<sup>th</sup> and you're signing the last piece of paper the tax preparer has put in front of you and you sign everything as fast as you can to meet the deadline.

Frankly, I find this proposal outrageous. That's why, on Thursday, as the top ranking Democrat on the committee that oversees the IRS I questioned IRS Commissioner Mark Everson about this short-sighted proposal.

I told Commissioner Everson that taxpayers deserve more privacy, not less. What consumer really wants to have their dinner interrupted by a telemarketer who's looking at a copy of their private tax return? I told Commissioner Everson that I hope the IRS will take a fresh look at these regulations and provide an outright prohibition on this information sharing. I also told the Commissioner that I would be following this issue closely as it moves forward.

## United for Cleaning Up Hanford

On Wednesday, I was pleased to welcome Governor Chris Gregoire to Washington, D.C. to help me make the case that cleaning up Hanford is a national priority. The people of the Tri-Cities sacrificed for our freedom during WWII and it is our nation's moral and legal duty to help clean up its nuclear waste. That is why the Governor and I sat down with key Senate leaders to urge Congress to approve \$690 million in federal funding for the Hanford vitrification plant.

Our congressional delegation and our governor stand united on this project, and that is the message we sent to Senate leadership this week. In a tough budget year, we made our case that cleaning up Hanford must be a priority and we will continue to fight to ensure that we do right by our Tri-Cities community.

## Another Step Forward for the Walla Walla VA Task Force

Nearly three years ago, the VA CARES Commission tried to close three VA hospitals in our state. One of the hospitals on the closure list was the Walla Walla VA Medical Center, which serves 69,000 veterans in Washington, Oregon and Idaho. The community rallied to save the hospital and protect veterans. Ultimately, we moved the hospital off the list for "immediate closure" and onto the list for "further consideration."

Then question now is what should happen to VA care in the region? To answer that question, the VA contracted Price Waterhouse Coopers to come up with options for the Walla Walla facility. I was very concerned about this analysis, so I provided \$250,000 to the Community Task Force so that local leaders could do their own study and come up with a proposal.

This week, the Task Force visited Washington, D.C. to meet with members of the Washington, Oregon and Idaho Congressional delegations and introduce their plan. I was also able to set up a meeting with the Task Force and Dr. Jonathan Perlin, the VA's Undersecretary for Healthcare. While Dr. Perlin made no direct commitments he did say that he would ensure that the VA Secretary Jim Nicholson takes a look and congratulated the Task Force for their hard work and dedication. This is a positive step forward for the Task Force, Walla Walla and the region's veterans.

I will continue to work to ensure that the voices of the local community are heard as this process moves forward.

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