

News from Congressman

Chet Edwards

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

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OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN CHET EDWARDS

Subcommittee Markup: FY 2009 Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, & Related Agencies

(Washington, DC)— U.S. Representative Chet Edwards, Chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction and Veterans Affairs, made the following statement at the subcommittee markup of the Fiscal Year 2009 bill today:

Good morning. We are here today to mark up the fiscal year 2009 Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations bill.

This bill sends a clear message to America's servicemen and women, their families, and our veterans that we appreciate and respect their service and sacrifice.

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 our new ranking Member, Mr. Wamp, for his insight, leadership, and partnership on this legislation. To prepare for this mark-up, we held 19 hearings and one briefing. Zach has been an extremely knowledgeable and conscientious partner in this process and has made this a better bill. 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 also want to 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.

This bill builds on the work that we accomplished in the fiscal year 2008 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 \$72.7 billion in discretionary spending. It is \$3.4 billion more than the President's request and \$8.8 billion more than fiscal year 2008. 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.

This bill provides \$24.8 billion for Military Construction, Family Housing and BRAC. This is \$400 million above the President's request. This bill fully funds BRAC, and provides for the modernization of training facilities, as well as the building of child care centers, barracks, and homes. It ensures that our active forces will have a better environment in which to train and operate, as well as an improved quality of life.

This bill includes additional funds to build on a quality of life initiative for our servicemen and women that we began with the fiscal year 2008 supplemental. First, we included nearly \$200 million in additional troop housing for Army and Marine Corps trainees. We want to send the message to soldiers and marines that we value and respect their decision to serve by improving the barracks they live in when they train.

We have also included an additional \$136 million for medical facilities. We learned during our hearing process that there is a huge unmet need for recapitalizing medical treatment facilities, many of which are old and do not meet current standards for care. We hope that our efforts, which began with the supplemental, have brought this issue to the attention of the Department and that we will see funding increases to address this backlog in future budget submissions.

This bill provides \$47.7 billion in discretionary funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs. This is \$2.9 billion more than the President's request and \$4.6 billion more than fiscal year 2008. Within this funding increase, we provide the Veterans Benefits Administration with the resources to hire 1,400 new claims processors in addition to the 703 additional personnel that were included in the budget submission.

This increase also provides for an additional \$1.6 billion for the Veterans Health Administration. These funds will allow the Department to increase access to services, ensure safer facilities and improve treatment including:

- \$568 million to increase enrollment of Priority 8 veterans by 10 percent;
- \$300 million to address the backlog in non-recurring maintenance at our medical facilities;
- \$200 million to increase access to fee-based care for veterans in areas where the Department does not offer services;
- \$116 million more to increase availability of new generation prosthetics;
- \$58 million to restore the cut taken by the Department for medical research in trauma, mental health and other areas that are critical to finding the best treatments for our OEF/OIF veterans, and to increase funding for research in areas that are most important to the veteran population;
- \$50 million more to increase the beneficiary travel reimbursement rate from 28.5 cents to 35 cents;
- \$40 million more to provide the additional case workers and medical services needed for our homeless veterans;

This bill also ensures that the Department will spend no less than \$3.8 billion on specialty mental health services and \$584 million on Substance Abuse programs. Additionally, language has been included to increase our oversight in this critical area to ensure that the Department is able to provide the best care both now, and in the future, for our veterans with mental illness; with PTSD; who struggle with substance abuse; who are thinking of suicide; and who suffer from military sexual trauma.

The bill also provides an additional \$11 million for the Office of Inspector General to restore the cut that was made to this budget in the President's request and to provide additional personnel to inspect the community based outpatient clinics and Vet Centers.

This bill increases Department of Veterans Affairs Construction by \$1.1 billion which will provide the needed funding for 6 additional major construction projects and the additional 145 minor construction projects that can be completed in fiscal year 2009. By accelerating this construction program, we are able to increase services to our veterans and avoid additional cost increases due to construction inflation.

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