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COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

ONE HUNDRED ELEVENTH CONGRESS

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Landmark Accomplishments for Veterans: 2007-2010

For too long, the needs of America's veterans had been forgotten. Even during wartime, budgets for the Department of Veterans Affairs failed to keep up with the real needs of veterans. Incidents like poor care for soldiers at Walter Reed and restricted access to VA health care were wake up calls that Congress needed to do more. Nearly four years ago, Democrats gained control of Congress and responded by passing significant legislation to provide historic budget increases for veterans, expand access to VA health care, improve health services for all veterans, and modernize benefits earned by America's troops. Democrats in Congress made the needs of veterans their top priority and the progress of the 110th and 111th Congress is a pledge to veterans of our vision for the future.

Since 2007, the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs conducted more than 200 hearings and passed more than 135 bills – making the Committee one of the most productive in history. The agenda was clear: address the emerging needs of veterans, as well as those needs that have lingered for years. Legislative successes include a G.I. Bill for the 21st Century, a nearly 60% increase in the baseline of the VA's health care budget, and a program for veteran caregivers which was the top priority of many veteran service organizations. Congress also passed advance appropriations to ensure a predictable funding stream for veterans' health care one year in advance and concentrated on providing care for veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury.

The cost of war is high. Too many veterans remain uncompensated for their service, and there is much to be done to prepare to keep the promises made to today's fighting troops. Meeting the needs of America's veterans is a fundamental cost of war – and will remain a top priority for Democrats.

A NEW DIRECTION FOR FUNDING THE NEEDS OF AMERICA'S VETERANS

Landmark Budgets Worthy of Our Veterans

Since 2007, Congress has provided a 60% increase in VA discretionary funding, adding nearly \$23 billion for veterans' health care and services. Although the country was involved in two major conflicts from 2003 to 2006, VA health care funding did not increase, co-pay increases were proposed, and investment in much-needed research to provide the best care for veterans suffering from unknown injuries languished. Responding to a VA strained to its breaking point, Committee Members went to work to ensure that the cost of the war included the cost of the warrior and fought for budgets that honor the sacrifices of our service members and veterans.

Advance Appropriations for Veterans Health Care (P.L. 111-81)

Congress successfully secured advance appropriations for the VA, for the first time providing a stable and uninterrupted source of funding for medical care for veterans one year in advance. Typically, the veterans' health care budget is subject to political delays – but not this year! This landmark law guarantees that the VA can better prepare for the health care needs of America's veterans.

VETERANS' HEALTH CARE UPDATE

Immediately Addressed Needs of Returning Veterans (P.L. 110-181)

- Expanded VA Health Care Access for Returning Combat Veterans In early 2007, the Walter Reed scandal broke and America saw first-hand the grim reality of seriously wounded service members as they struggled to get necessary care and support during their recovery. Since the majority of returning wounded enters the VA system for their medical treatment, the Committee immediately identified weaknesses in the VA's ability to ensure a seamless continuum of care. First, Congress voted to provide an additional three years of VA health care eligibility for returning Iraq and Afghanistan veterans (for a total of five years).
- Improved Treatment for Signature War Injuries Laws were passed to improve and expand the VA's ability to care for returning Iraq and Afghanistan veterans suffering from traumatic brain injury, while also addressing the rising instances of post-traumatic stress.
- Information Sharing Saves Lives In 2009, President Obama ordered the Department of Defense and the VA to work together to define and build a Joint Virtual Lifetime Electronic record that will ultimately contain administrative and medical information from the day an individual enters military service throughout their military career, and into the veteran phase of life.

Access, Access, Access (P.L. 111-163 and P.L. 111-117)

- Low Income Veterans Additional funding allowed VA to open up the health care system to new non-service connected, Priority Group 8 veterans, a group of veterans shut out of the VA health care system since 2003. VA has raised the income threshold by 10 percent to enroll 193,000 new veterans and plans to raise the income threshold by 15 percent to enroll an additional 99,000 veterans in 2011.
- Women Veterans The Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010 expands and improves VA services for the 1.8 million women veterans, anticipates the expected increase of women warriors over the next five years, provides for a much-needed study on barriers to health care access for women, provides training for mental health care professionals caring for veterans with sexual trauma, and authorizes VA to provide health care for newborn infants of women veterans.
- Rural Veterans Congress provided an additional \$30 million in funding to increase the number of Community Based Outpatient Clinics for the more than 3.2 million veterans living in rural areas who do not have ready access to VA hospitals. Congress dramatically increased the veteran's mileage reimbursement from 11 cents to 41.5 cents – the same as a government employee. The Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010 establishes a grant program for veteran service organizations to provide transportation options to veterans in highly rural areas and increases the health care options provided to our rural veterans by authorizing stronger partnerships with community providers and the Department of Health and Human Services.

Increased Support for Veteran Caregivers (P.L. 111-163)

- All Veterans Supporting veteran caregivers was the top legislative priority of many veteran service organizations. The Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010 provides immediate support for veteran caregivers by creating a program to offer caregiver training, access to mental health counseling, and 24-hour respite care in the veteran's home. This allows caregivers temporary relief without having to leave the veteran at a medical facility.
- Returning Veterans Certain veterans who served in Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom are eligible to select a caregiver to receive a financial stipend along with travel and lodging expenses associated with the veteran's care.

Addressed Urgent Mental Health Needs of Veterans (P.L. 111-163, P.L. 110-387 and P.L. 110-110)

- Suicide Prevention The Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010 addresses the troubling reality of post-traumatic stress and troubling incidents of suicide among the veteran population by requiring a much-needed and long-awaited study on veterans' suicide and requiring the VA to provide counseling referrals for members of the Armed Forces who are not otherwise eligible for readjustment counseling. The Joshua Omvig Veterans Suicide Prevention Act addresses the troubling increase of suicide in our veteran community. It offers comprehensive services to veterans and established a 24-hour toll-free suicide hotline which has served more than 300,000 veterans, family members, and friends.
- Service Connection for PTSD After Congressional pressure to address the difficulties veterans encountered when required to prove stressors in order to receive service-connected compensation for post-traumatic stress incurred as a result of their military service, VA simplified the process to immediately help combat veterans get the help they need. Now, proof of service in uniform in a war zone, combined with a later diagnosis of PTSD, will be all that is required.
- Counseling for Families The Veterans' Mental Health and Other Care Improvements Act of 2008 expands mental health services, increases research through the National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and provides much needed counseling for families of veterans.
- Substance Use Counseling The Veterans Mental Health and Other Care Improvements Act of 2008 offers enhanced screening, counseling, outpatient and inpatient care, and other key improvements to the substance use treatment services available through VA.

Expanded Veteran Homelessness Prevention and Care (P.L. 111-163 and P.L. 111-275)

- Expanded Housing Options Congress provided funding to renovate surplus buildings on VA medical campuses to use as housing for homeless veterans. The Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010 expands the number of places where homeless veterans may receive supportive services. For veterans struggling without a roof over their heads, this small change in the law will make a big difference in their lives.
- Expanded Support Services The Veterans' Benefits Act of 2010 reauthorizes the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program through fiscal year 2011 and authorizes an additional \$1 million to provide dedicated services for homeless women veterans and homeless veterans with children. Grants would be made available to provide job training, counseling, placement services, and child care services to expedite the reintegration of veterans into the labor force.

Invested in Research for Veterans' Health Care (P.L. 111-163 and P.L. 111-275)

- Increased Budgets Congress invested in healing and helping injured veterans by adding \$144 million for medical and prosthetic research, an increase of more than 25% over three years.
- Gulf War Illness Research Congressional hearings found that veterans are suffering from acute and chronic symptoms attributed to their military service in the Gulf War Region and continue to experience barriers to care and services from the VA. The Veterans' Benefits Act of 2010 extends the evaluation of chronic multi-symptom illness by the National Academy of Sciences of veterans of the Persian Gulf War and Post-9/11 Global Operations and allows the Institute of Medicine to carry out a comprehensive review of best treatment practices for chronic multi-symptom illness in Gulf War veterans, along with a plan for dissemination of best practices through VA.
- Expanded Research Partners The Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010 authorizes the establishment of multi-medical center research corporations by merging single facility nonprofit research corporations and improves accountability of the corporations.

BENEFITS UPDATE

A G.I. Bill for the 21st Century (P.L. 110-252)

The Post-9/11 G.I. Bill is the greatest overhaul of the G.I. Bill in over 20 years, covering the cost of a college education at a public university. This fall, nearly 300,000 veterans are enrolled in college as a result of the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill and more than \$2.9 billion in education benefits have been paid to veteran students.

Enhanced Employment Opportunities (P.L. 111-275)

The Veterans' Benefits Act of 2010 reauthorizes the VA work-study program and provides on-the-job training for veterans in the energy sector, by awarding competitive grants to three states that boast a diverse energy industry and have the ability to carry out such a training program.

A Modernized VA Home Loan Program (P.L. 110-245, P.L. 110-298, P.L. 110-389)

Sweeping legislation provided veterans with the necessary time to readjust from the battlefield back into their communities without fear of losing their home. New laws prohibit foreclosure for nine months after military service, provide a much needed increase to the VA loan limit to better match current home prices, and revamp the VA home loan program by enabling more veterans to refinance with VA loans. Congress also expanded homeownership opportunities by making thousands of veterans eligible for low-interest loans.

Reforms to Benefits Claims System (P.L. 110-389)

The Veterans' Benefits Improvement Act of 2008 provides essential reforms to bring the claims processing system up-to-date for more accurate and timely delivery of benefits to veterans, families, and survivors. The Committee continues to monitor the on-going implementation and continues to focus added attention on the disgraceful claims backlog by adding staff to reduce the time to process new claims. Already, the VA has hired 8,300 additional claims processors.

Better Insurance Options for Service Members and Veterans (P.L. 111-275)

The Veterans' Benefits Act of 2010 ensures the welfare of veterans and their families by providing increases to outdated insurance policy limits for service members and veterans, many who are severely disabled or have suffered traumatic injury. The new law provides an increase to the maximum loan guarantee amount under the Veterans' Mortgage Life Insurance program and allows totally disabled veterans to receive free Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance coverage for two years following separation from active or reserve duty.

Honor for Fallen Service Members and Their Families (P.L. 111-275)

The Veterans' Benefits Act of 2010 increases burial and funeral benefits and plot allowances for veterans who are eligible for a burial at a national cemetery or who died in a VA facility from \$300 to \$700. Further, parents whose child gave their life in service to our country would be allowed to be buried in a national cemetery with that child when their veteran child has no living spouse or children.

Protection for Service Members Called to Combat (P.L. 111-275)

The Veterans' Benefits Act of 2010 prohibits early termination fees for certain contracts like cell phone service and residential leases after service members receive notice of military orders to relocate to a site that does not support the contract.

Better Benefits (P.L. 111-275)

The Veterans' Benefits Act of 2010 increases the number of veterans able to receive independent assisted living services, provides greater automobile and adaptive equipment to veterans with severe burn injuries, and increases the automobile allowance for disabled veterans from \$11,000 to \$18,900.