



Rep. Adam Smith has travelled to Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and throughout Northern Africa. His opinions are often sought on U.S. terrorism policy. Here, Smith addresses policy experts at CSIS.

House Increases Funding for Veterans Programs

For the third year in a row, the House approved funding levels for veterans' programs that exceeded the request of the Independent Budget, which is formulated by a coalition of veterans' organizations. The Veterans Appropriations bill, passed by the House on July 10, 2009, provides \$108.8 billion for the Department of Veterans Affairs to fund mental healthcare, assistance for homeless veterans, and to improve access to care for rural veterans. This represents a \$14.5 billion increase over last years' budget.

The legislation includes \$48.2 billion in advanced funding for healthcare related accounts for Fiscal Year 2011. For the last 22 fiscal years, VA Appropriations bills have failed to be enacted prior to the start of the fiscal year, delaying the ability of the VA to deliver high quality care to veterans. By providing advanced appropriations for VA healthcare, we can assure that our nation's veterans are not harmed by the political debates that may occur and delay the passage of appropriations

Efforts to Further Improve the G.I. Bill

I was a proud cosponsor of the new G.I. Bill last year, but thought it still needed some necessary improvements. This year, I've been working with my colleagues to make college more affordable and change some of the housing stipend guidelines provided under the education benefit.

Under current law, only Title 10 service is included when calculating eligibility for education benefits. For the National Guard, this means their service under Title 32 orders,

such as protection of US airspace; Hurricane Katrina response; border security as part of Operation Jumpstart; and full time Active Guard and Reserve duty is not counted towards eligibility. To address this problem, I cosponsored the National Guard Educational Equality Act.

Additionally, the current program requires that individuals attend at least one "on-site" class in order to receive the housing stipend. However, many individuals take distance learning courses, and are not able to actually attend classroom-based courses. To fix this, I cosponsored H.R.950, which would allow individuals to collect the housing stipend while taking distance learning courses, as long as they meet the other requirements for the program.

Expansion of the Homeowners Assistance Program

Using funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the Homeowners Assistance Program (HAP) is being expanded to partially reimburse eligible military personnel, surviving spouses, and federal civilian employees whose service to the nation has required them to relocate and sell their primary residence at a loss.

The program has been providing financial assistance to military personnel and DoD civilians since 1966, mainly at Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) sites where government action caused a decrease in market home values. While the HAP expansion is not designed to pay 100 percent of losses or to cover all declines in value, it can help protect eligible applicants from financial catastrophe due to significant losses in their home values.

For questions about specific beneficiary applications, please visit the DoD HAP website, <http://hap.usace.army.mil>. Questions not answered there may be directed to the Army Corps of Engineers at (202) 761-4113 or my office at (253) 593-6600.

Ensuring Veterans Get The Benefits They Earned

On January 15, 2009, I introduced H.R.593 to ensure that veterans discharged for "combat-related" injuries receive the benefits they have earned. In March 2008, the Department of Defense issued a directive-memo which narrowed the scope of the definition of "combat-related" injuries.

This new definition has made it more difficult for disabled veterans to receive their benefits from both the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs and has cost disabled veterans thousands of dollars in benefits.

My legislation would revert back to the definition used prior to the March 2008 policy change, which was broadly defined and covered most, if not all, injuries sustained in a combat zone, combat training or other hazardous service.



Rep. Smith travelled to Afghanistan and Pakistan in September. Here, Smith is arriving in Pakistan to meet with US troops and officials.

Legislation to Support Military Families

On July 28, 2009, I introduced the Military Family Leave Act of 2009, a bill that will provide military families with the ability to spend quality time with their deployed or deploying loved ones. Specifically, this legislation would provide two weeks of unpaid vacation to the civilian spouse, children, or parents of a member of the military who receives notification of deployment or is currently deployed.

While the Fiscal Year 2008 National Defense Authorization Act added a provision to the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) allowing military families to take time off for a number of reasons connected with a deployment, not all employees are eligible under current law. The Military Family Leave Act of 2009 seeks to ensure that all military families have the ability to take two-weeks of unpaid vacation in response to an upcoming or current deployment of a loved one. Military families make a tremendous sacrifice for our country and they should not have to be concerned about how their employer will respond if a loved one is deployed. This bill relieves some of that stress.

The 111th Congress has passed legislation and funded programs that honor the service and commitment of our military personnel, veterans and their families.