

August 2009

House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

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Note from Chairman Bob Filner



Chairman Bob Filner

While we may be divided on where we stand on the current conflicts, this Nation must be united in seeing that every soldier, sailor, airman, and marine is welcomed back with all the compassion this grateful Nation can bestow. Supporting our troops is a mandate – not a slogan. It is our duty as a Nation, when we put our men and women in harm's way, to care for them when they return.

The House Committee on Veterans' Affairs honors the service and sacrifices made by America's proud veterans and works to ensure that we keep the promises made to our veterans.

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A handwritten signature of Bob Filner in black ink, written in a cursive style.

Talking Points: Priorities & Accomplishments

Advance Appropriations for VA Health Care (H.R. 1016) - *Passed by the House*

- Veteran service organizations have long advocated funding veterans' health care in advance of the start of each fiscal year. This issue is the top priority of veterans groups this year and responds to chronically late VA budgets – over the last 22 years, 19 VA budgets were late.
- The House passed H.R. 1016 to provide funding for medical-related accounts for the next fiscal year one year in advance and offered a historic new approach to caring for veterans in the future.

Improving Care for Female Veterans (H.R. 1211) - *Passed by the House*

- The number of female veterans enrolled for medical care with the department is expected to increase by 30 percent in the next five years. Women veterans coming into the VA system are younger, have distinct health needs, and access VA health care at a higher rate. Further, women are serving in combat conditions right alongside their male counterparts, which raises a whole new set of issues for these veterans.
- The House passed legislation to expand and improve VA services for the 1.8 million women veterans. The House understands the urgent need of America's female veterans.

Support for Veteran Caregivers (H.R. 3155) - *Passed by the House*

- Today, more service members are surviving the wounds of war than those injured in previous conflicts. Family members and other caregivers have quit jobs, delayed schooling, and made other difficult sacrifices to provide care for injured veterans.
- H.R. 3155 will provide immediate support for America's wounded warriors – by conducting outreach, providing training, and offering counseling to their caregivers.

Preventing and Ending Veteran Homelessness (H.R. 1171) - *Passed by the House*

- Most of the VA's existing programs are targeted to veterans who are currently homeless, by providing employment opportunities and housing assistance to help prevent repeat episodes of homelessness. There is an urgent and immediate need to address homeless prevention, target high risk veterans with early intervention programs, and provide on-going evaluation and support.
- The House voted to strengthen national efforts to prevent America's heroes from becoming homeless in the first place.

Improving Life and Disability Insurance Options (H.R. 3219) - *Passed by the House*

- The House voted to give veterans greater flexibility in their insurance choices by supporting legislation to ensure that veterans are able to plan appropriately for their financial security and have the best and most affordable options available.

G.I. Bill of the 21st Century - *Public Law*

- The Post-9/11 G.I. Bill begins on August 1 and will help make our veterans part of the economic recovery, much like the veterans of World War II.

Veterans Funding Update

The 111th Congress has supported America's veterans with a budget worthy of their service and sacrifice. Combined, the stimulus and supplemental bills have added a \$1.4 billion increase for veterans funding in 2009. The House successfully passed an appropriations bill that would add \$14.5 billion to the budget in 2010. And, the House voted to provide funding for 2011 to ensure that the veterans health care system can best care for America's wounded warriors.

H.R. 3082 – FY 2010 Military Construction/VA Appropriations

- The House approved a funding bill that provides a path to restoring and revitalizing the services provided to veterans by adding \$14.5 billion above fiscal year 2009 (July 10, 2009).
- Provides appropriations for fiscal year 2010 – and advance appropriations for 2011.
- The largest veterans funding increase ever requested by a President!
- Third straight budget to exceed the request of the Independent Budget!
- The New Democratic Congress has provided \$17.7 billion over the last two years – and enactment of H.R. 3082 will amount to a 58% increase in the past 2.5 years under Democratic leadership.

H.R. 1016 – Veterans Health Care Budget Reform and Transparency Act

- A top priority for veteran service organizations.
- The House passed legislation to allow Congress to fund VA medical accounts one year ahead of schedule (June 23, 2009).
- Responds to chronically late VA budgets – over the last 22 years, 19 VA budgets were late.
- A historic new approach to providing adequate and timely funding for veterans' health care.

Supplemental Appropriations Act of 2009 (P.L. 111-32)

- Expands the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill to cover the full cost of college for surviving military children by creating the "Marine Gunnery Sergeant John David Fry" scholarship to provide education benefits to children of deceased active duty service members.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (P.L. 111-5)

- Congressional approval of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act was the first major step in rebuilding our country's economy, while also honoring our veterans.
- Provided a \$1.4 billion increase for the Department of Veterans Affairs for maintenance at VA medical facilities, construction of veterans' extended care facilities, and veteran cemetery repairs.
- Provided an economic stimulus payment of \$250 to disabled veterans receiving VA compensation or pension.

HVAC Legislative Update

The House Committee on Veterans' Affairs has managed an aggressive agenda to address the health care needs of America's veterans, focusing on female veterans, caregiver support, and homeless prevention. The Committee has also worked to improve benefits for veterans and their families, including better insurance options, grants for housing improvement for disabled veterans, and strengthening programs to support returning veterans.

The following bills have passed the House of Representatives:

H.R. 1211 – Women Veterans Health Care Improvement Act

- Expands and improves VA health care services for the 1.8 million women veterans.
- Requires the VA to provide medical care for newborn children of women veterans, establishes a pilot program for child care services, and enhances programs for veterans suffering from military sexual trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder.

H.R. 3155 – Caregiver Assistance and Resource Enhancement Act

- Responds to the needs of veteran caregivers by establishing a caregiver program for veterans seriously wounded while on active duty.
- Provides support services to family and non-family caregivers of veterans, provides educational sessions on how to be a better caregiver, increase information and outreach efforts, and would also make counseling and mental health services available to family and non-family caregivers of veterans.
- The Dole-Shalala Commission (July 2007) found that of the 1,730 injured OEF/OIF veterans surveyed, about 21 percent of active duty, 15 percent of the reserve, and 24 percent of retired or separated service members had friends or family who gave up a job to be a caregiver.

H.R. 1171 – Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program Reauthorization Act of 2009

- Requires VA to provide comprehensive services to prevent veteran homelessness.
- Reauthorizes the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program through 2014 which provides grants for job training, counseling, placement services and child care.
- Includes an additional \$10 million to provide dedicated services for homeless women veterans and homeless veterans with children.

H.R. 1016 – Veterans Health Care Budget Reform and Transparency Act of 2009

- Landmark bill to respond to years of chronic underfunding of VA medical care.
- Allows funding for the VA health care budget one year in advance.
- Finally, timely and predictable funding for veterans health care!

H.R. 2770 – Veterans Nonprofit Research and Education Corporations Enhancement Act of 2009

- Updates laws relating to nonprofit research and education corporations so they can better support VA's research mission.

H.R. 3219 – Insurance and Health Care Improvements

- Comprehensive bill to expand options for veterans and service members to obtain life insurance policies that better fit their needs and the needs of their families.
- Improves health services for veterans by increasing participation of physician assistants at the Veterans Health Administration, prohibits the collection of copayments for certain veterans who are catastrophically disabled, establishes a 'Committee on Care of Veterans with Traumatic Brain Injury,' waives housing loan fees for some disabled veterans, expands nursing home care for certain veterans, and allows Medal of Honor recipients to receive a priority status for medical services.

H.R. 23 – Belated Thank You to the Merchant Mariners of World War II Act

- Establishes the Merchant Mariner Equity Compensation Fund for payments of a monthly benefit of \$1,000 to each individual who, between December 7, 1941, and December 31, 1946, was a documented member of the U.S. Merchant Marine.

H.R. 1293 – Disabled Veterans Home Improvement and Structural Alteration Grant Increase Act of 2009

- Provides an increase in the amount available to veterans with service-connected disabilities for improvements and structural alterations .

H.R. 1170 – Grant Program for Specially Adapted Housing

- Provides grants to encourage the development of new assistive technologies for specially adapted housing for disabled veterans, allocating grant amounts to \$200,000 annually per recipient.

VA Oversight: Solutions for Veterans & Accountability for Americans

The House Committee on Veterans' Affairs is committed to providing rigorous oversight of various VA operations to improve services for veterans, as well as provide accountability for the American taxpayer. The Committee has held a series of oversight hearings to measure program results, end waste, and combat mismanagement.

Improved Access for Female Veterans

The Committee is committed to better understanding – and meeting – the needs of America's 1.8 million women veterans. Chairman Filner conducted a roundtable discussion to identify the specific issues facing women veterans. A joint subcommittee hearing (Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs & Health) specifically addressed issues that solely affect women or impact female veterans differently than male veterans. Recently, the Government Accountability Office issued a report that found wide variations in facilities and programs available to America's women veterans and found that VA outpatient clinics and hospitals failed to fully comply with federal privacy standards for women.

G.I. Bill for the 21ST Century Begins August 1

On August 1, 2009, veterans will start receiving college education benefits under the new Post-9/11 G.I. Bill. An estimated 2.1 million members of the military who have served on active duty since September 11, 2001, including activated reservist and members of the National Guard, will be eligible for up to four years of education benefits, including stipends for housing and books. The Committee continues to monitor VA's progress in implementing the new G.I. Bill requirements to best serve America's veterans.

Reach the Goal of Interoperable Health Records

A September 30, 2009, deadline looms for the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs to achieve an interoperable health record. The Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations recently conducted a hearing to ensure that both departments are organized and working together to deliver a comprehensive system that will modernize and simplify record sharing. Oversight of this transition will continue.

Ensuring Veteran Protection

The Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations conducted a hearing to review recent allegations of improper cancer treatments at the Philadelphia VA Medical Center. Members of the Subcommittee found that oversight protections were in place but not being utilized effectively. VA has since reviewed current safety standards and enforcement procedures of the brachytherapy program, implemented new training requirements, and continues to address its peer review efforts.

The Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations held a series of meetings and conducted a hearing to evaluate endoscopy procedures at the VA, after receiving reports of improper cleaning and incorrect usage of reusable medical equipment. The Subcommittee is committed to ensuring the problem is corrected, making certain that exposed veterans receive the care they need, and continuing to investigate the extent to which veterans were exposed to contaminated equipment while undergoing routine procedures.

HVAC Preview

The House Committee on Veterans' Affairs has laid out an aggressive legislative agenda and continues to work to keep the promises made to America's veterans.

Address the Claims Backlog

The Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs continues to hold hearings on the disability claims processing system. The Subcommittee works with veterans, veteran service organizations, and other interested stakeholders to find innovative ways to streamline the claims processing system and deal with the increasing backlog of veteran claims. Findings from the hearings and witness testimony will provide the foundation for comprehensive legislation to further tackle the claims backlog that stymies our wounded veterans from receiving the benefits they earned and deserve.

Institute of Medicine Report on Agent Orange

A July 2009 report from the Institute of Medicine found suggestive but limited evidence that exposure to Agent Orange and other herbicides used during the Vietnam War is associated with an increased chance of developing heart disease and Parkinson's disease for Vietnam veterans. U.S. forces sprayed Agent Orange and other defoliants over parts of Vietnam and surrounding areas from 1962 to 1970 and were released from airplanes, helicopters, boats, and ground vehicles.

National Defense Authorization Act (H.R. 2647)

The House passed the NDAA on June 25, 2009, which includes five important provisions to improve care and services for America's veterans. First, the bill requires a report itemizing the current research and treatment efforts for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), in order to reduce duplicative efforts and promote collaboration between the VA, Department of Defense, and Department of Health and Human Services. Second, the bill calls for the development and implementation of a secure and electronic method for forwarding discharge and separation documents to state VA offices. Third, a progress report on the Joint Virtual Lifetime Electronic Record is required by December 2010. Fourth, the bill allows a one-year expansion for concurrent receipt of veterans' disability compensation. Finally, the bill would amend the Family and Medical Leave Act to provide better protections for injured veterans. A similar bill has passed the Senate and the Committee will continue to monitor the legislation as it moves forward.

Electronic Medical Records

The Committee continues to examine the progress being made by the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs in ensuring electronic health record interoperability. President Obama ordered the DoD 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. This information sharing is a matter of life and death for our veterans.