

## Chairman's Column

Although we can never adequately thank our brave veterans and troops for their service to our nation, this Veterans Day we can humbly salute them and their families for their sacrifice. Leaders in Congress promised a new direction for veterans and continue to work to live up to that promise – passing major legislation and funding unprecedented increases.

The House Committee on Veterans' Affairs works hard every day to ensure that the contributions of our brave veterans are never forgotten. It is the solemn duty of this Committee to make certain that America takes care of her sons and daughters. We must continue on a path to making the benefits provided to our veterans first-rate and uncompromised.

As part of your Veterans Day, I hope you will consider hosting a service project that benefits veterans, members of our armed forces, and/or military families. I have included a list of possible activities for Veterans Day – or any day!

## New Law to Honor America's Veterans

### **Veterans Health Care Budget Reform and Transparency Act of 2009 (P.L. 111-81)**

This new law allows Congress to fund VA medical accounts one year ahead of schedule! This historic new funding approach will ensure adequate and timely funding for veterans' health care – and end chronically late budgets for the VA.

## Priority Legislation Passed By the House

**H.R. 1211, Women Veterans Health Care Improvement Act**, would expand and improve VA services for the 1.8 million women veterans.

**H.R. 3155, Caregiver Assistance and Resource Enhancement Act**, will provide immediate support for America's wounded warriors – by conducting outreach, providing training, and offering counseling to their caregivers.

**H.R. 1171, Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program Reauthorization Act**, strengthens national efforts to prevent America's heroes from ever becoming homeless.

**H.R. 3219, Veterans' Insurance and Health Care Improvements Act of 2009**, gives veterans greater flexibility in their insurance choices and ensures that veterans are able to plan appropriately for their financial security.

**H.R. 3949, Veterans' Small Business Assistance and Servicemembers Protection Act of 2009**, addresses reintegration challenges for veterans and provides enhanced protections for veteran-owned small business, deployed service members, and family members of veterans.

## Veterans Funding Update: A New Direction for Our Nation's Veterans

**The 111<sup>th</sup> 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 voted to provide funding for Fiscal Year 2011 to ensure the best care for America's wounded warriors in the future.**

### ***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.

### ***Veterans Health Care Budget Reform and Transparency Act of 2009 (P.L. 111-81)***

- A top priority for veteran service organizations.
- President Obama signed legislation to allow Congress to fund VA medical accounts one year ahead of schedule (October 22, 2009).
- Responds to chronically late VA budgets – over the last 22 years, 19 VA budgets were late and offers 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.

## **TALKING POINTS: A New Direction for Our Nation's Veterans**

While we may be divided on where we stand on the war, 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.

### **Oversight of Post-9/11 G.I. Bill**

- This fall, veterans began to receive college education benefits under the new Post-9/11 G.I. Bill. Initially, VA encountered problems in delivering some benefits to students in a timely fashion and responded by providing emergency checks to enrolled students. The Committee continues to monitor VA's progress in implementing the new G.I. Bill requirements to best serve America's veterans.
- An estimated 2.1 million members of the military who have served on active duty since September 11, 2001, including activated reservists and members of the National Guard, will be eligible for up to four years of education benefits, including stipends for housing and books.

### **Improving Care for Female Veterans**

- 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 H.R. 1211 to expand and improve VA services for the 1.8 million women veterans. The House understands the urgent needs of America's female veterans.

### **Providing Support for Veteran Caregivers**

- 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.
- The House passed H.R. 3155 to provide immediate support for America's wounded warriors – by conducting outreach, providing training, and offering counseling to their caregivers.

## **Preventing and Ending Veteran Homelessness**

- 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 passed H.R. 1171 to strengthen national efforts to prevent America's heroes from becoming homeless in the first place.

## **VA Decision to Restart National Vietnam Veterans Longitudinal Study**

- The decision by VA Secretary Eric Shinseki to restart the National Vietnam Veterans Longitudinal Study will return VA to the forefront of policy and research. Findings from the study will inform policy regarding health services, rehabilitation, and compensation, not only for this generation, but for those serving in Iraq and Afghanistan as well.
- In order to better understand the consequences of war, we must increase our knowledge of the Vietnam generation so we can better care for America's veterans.
- VA initiated the study in 1984 as a result of a Congressional mandate, and the findings continue to provide valuable insight to the long-term health consequences of service in the Vietnam War. In 2000, Congress again acted to direct VA to reassess this generation of veterans in a follow-up study and provide a report by October 2004. This directive has been ignored by VA – until now!

## **Supporting Combat Veterans with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder**

- The Department of Veterans Affairs has proposed a rule change for stressor determinations for PTSD which would liberalize the evidentiary standards for combat veterans. When a veteran files a claim for PTSD, the stressors are not always easy to verify, which can result in combat veterans being denied an earned benefit.
- Congressman John Hall introduced H.R. 952 which would reduce the need for veterans to meet the current stringent level of evidence for PTSD. The proposed PTSD rule recognizes this evidentiary burden and follows the Committee's lead on this issue.
- VA is poised to take necessary action to ensure that veterans get the support they need as they transition from combat to the civilian world.

## **Agent Orange Veterans**

- VA announced it establish a service-connection for Vietnam veterans with three specific illnesses (B cell leukemias, Parkinson's Disease, and ischemic heart disease) based on evidence of an association with the herbicides referred to as Agent Orange. As a result, veterans no longer will have to prove an association between these illnesses and their military service.
- This decision is an important first step towards addressing the immediate needs of our veterans. This is a start into fixing the claims backlog and ensuring veterans have access to the care they earned.
- It is important to note that this decision comes too late for too many. Time is of the essence for many Vietnam veterans currently suffering from illness as a result of their service – whether on the ground, in the air, or on the water.
- 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.

## Veterans Day Activities: A New Direction for Honoring Our Nation's Veterans

As part of your Veterans Day activities, I hope you will consider hosting a service project that benefits veterans, members of our armed forces, and/or military families. These ideas are not meant to be comprehensive, but rather to spark your thinking about projects that would be appropriate to fulfill local priorities in your district. These activities are great for Veterans Day – or any day!

Below is a list of possible one-day projects:

- Perform a landscaping or maintenance project at a VA site or VSO facility.
- Provide maintenance at a local memorial site. (This could take place before Veterans Day to prepare for ceremonies on the 11<sup>th</sup>.)
- Assemble and/or deliver care packages and/or notes of thanks and support for veterans, service members, and/or military families.
- Host a canned food drive and deliver to needy veterans or local VSOs.
- Assemble groups of volunteers to visit veterans at VA hospitals and nursing homes and thank them for their service.
- Interview veterans and record their accounts of their experiences. (The Library of Congress has resources on its website at <http://www.loc.gov/vets>.)
- Offer resume-writing assistance and/or mock interviews for veterans who are embarking on new careers.

You may also want to consider a longer-term project:

- Professional mentoring for veterans embarking on new careers.
- Tutoring and mentoring children of service members who are overseas.
- Recruiting volunteers to provide legal assistance or other professional services to veterans and military families

Ideas for developing a project:

- Identify needs in your local veteran community. You may wish to contact your local VA representative or local veteran service organization for suggestions. Local elected officials may also be good resources or partners. (A list of VSOs can be found at <http://www1.va.gov/VSO/index.cfm>.)
- Identify projects that might address these needs and select one or more that would be appropriate for volunteers to assist with. (You might also consider whether a multi-day or ongoing project would provide follow-up opportunities beyond Veterans Day for your office and for volunteers.)
- Invite volunteers. Publicize the service event through your website, local press, e-newsletter, and community contacts. Consider college campuses, K-12 schools, public employees, civic groups, faith-based organizations, non-profits, business groups and other potential sources of volunteers.

For assistance in developing plans for Veterans Service Day projects, contact Rebecca Cluster of the Corporation for National and Community Service at (202) 606-6729.