

I would like to share some important news regarding funding for our nation's veterans. Today, June 15, 2007, the House of Representatives passed the largest single funding increase for the Veterans Administration (VA) in the agency's 77 year history. As you know, the current VA healthcare system is struggling to care for wounded veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. This dramatic increase helps fulfill our obligation to the men and women who risked their lives on behalf of a grateful nation. We must provide medical care that honors the gravity of their sacrifice. This bill is a momentous achievement for our nation's veterans, and it sets an important precedent to honor their service by fully funding veteran's healthcare in the years to come.

The Military Construction/VA spending bill passed today by the House of Representatives:

- Increases the VA budget by \$6.7 billion above the Fiscal Year (FY) 2007 level, the largest single increase in the 77 year history of the Veterans Administration
- Ensures quality health care for 5.8 million patients, including about 263,000 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, which the VA will treat in FY 2008.
- Reduces the 400,000 claims backlog for veterans waiting for disability and other benefits by adding more than 1,100 new claims processors.
- Provides much needed maintenance of VA health care facilities. A recent VA report outlined 1,000 specific problems at VA health facilities around the country, with a backlog of \$5 billion in maintenance.
- Provides \$600 million more than the President's request for mental health, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and makes five polytrauma centers and three Centers of Excellence for Mental Health and fully operational this year to care for those returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. An estimated one-third of veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are facing mental health challenges, and up to 300,000 troops are expected to return from Iraq suffering from TBI.
- Develops and operates a toll-free telephone and web-based hotline for veterans to report on deficiencies in VA medical facilities and care.

I am proud to join numerous veterans organizations in supporting today's spending bill. Providing the small dignity of proper healthcare is incumbent upon such a wealthy and prosperous nation.