Keeping the Promise

Accomplishments in the 110th Congress
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Note from the Chairman

When I became Chairman of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, the VA was strained to its breaking point by years of chronic underfunding and a "business as usual" attitude. The Committee set out an aggressive agenda to identify the needs of our veterans and to ensure that the promises we made to them were kept. The Committee held 107 hearings, 50 percent more than the previous Congress, and we followed through and passed 75 quality veterans' bills – more than the previous two Congresses combined.

There are hundreds of thousands of new veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. It is simply our duty as a Nation, when we put our men and women in harm's way, to care for them when they return. Although this Democratic Congress has focused on the issues affecting our returning service members, we must also live up to the promise to honor the service and sacrifice of our veterans from previous conflicts. Today, the VA is in a better position to care for all of our veterans.

Our aggressive agenda culminated in the passage of comprehensive legislation to improve health care and benefits for our veterans. I have attached a list of accomplishments that this Democratic Congress has been able to achieve. We were not able to do all that we wanted to, but we did a lot, and next Congress, working together, we plan on building upon our successes and making sure that we honor our warriors by taking care of them when they return. We will keep our promise to our Nation's heroes of the past, present and future.

Sincerely,

Bob Filner

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A Budget Worthy of Our Veterans

When the new 110th Congress was sworn in, the VA budget had been frozen for months, straining its ability to provide health care and benefits to the veterans who earned them. VA budgets had been on a treadmill for years, and the VA could not keep up with veterans' needs. In past years, supportive speeches took the place of concrete increases to provide better care and benefits to America's veterans. Truly, the Democratic Congress has supported America's veterans with both their words and their deeds.

The Consolidated Security, Disaster Assistance, and Continuing Appropriations Act of 2009 (P.L. 110-329)
H.R. 2638 was signed into law on September 30, 2008. This bill provided a $4.5 billion budget increase, nearly $3 billion more than the Administration requested. It also makes important investments to provide increased mental health care, assist homeless veterans, increase VA long-term care, and provide additional funding to construct and modernize VA facilities and provide needed maintenance.

The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-161)
H.R. 2764 was signed into law on December 26, 2008. This bill increased funding for veterans health care and benefits by $6.6 billion, the single largest increase in the 77-year history of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

U.S. Troops Readiness, Veterans' Care, Katrina Recovery, and Iraq Accountability Appropriations Act of 2007 (P.L. 110-28)
H.R. 2206 provided $1.8 billion for veterans, including funding to address increased demand for VA services among service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, including mental health care, readjustment care, and polytrauma care. The bill was signed May 25, 2007.

Revised Continuing Appropriations Resolution for 2007 (P.L. 110-5)
H.J. Res 20 provided a $3.4 billion budget increase for the Department of Veterans Affairs for continuing appropriations for FY07. The resolution was signed into law on February 15, 2007.

Talking Points:

- The cost of the war must include the cost of the warrior. This Democratic Congress added $16.3 billion worth of new money for veterans' health care and services.
- House Democrats did more to increase veterans funding in the last 2 years than Republicans did in the last 12 years. In FY08 alone, Democrats passed the largest increase in veterans health care and benefits funding in the history of the VA.
- This unprecedented increase proves that supporting our troops and veterans is not just a slogan for Democrats – it is our mandate!
- This is the second budget in a row that exceeds the request of the *Independent Budget*, a coalition of veterans' organizations that have formulated an annual budget request for more than 20 years.

Budget Details for Fiscal Year 2009

DEPARMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS: $47.6 billion, $4.5 billion above 2008 and $2.8 billion over the President's request, for veterans' medical care, claims processors, and facility improvements. Some notable provisions include:

- **Veterans Health Administration**: $41 billion, $1.8 billion over the President's request and $4.1 billion above 2008, for veterans medical care. The Veterans Health Administration estimates they will treat more than 5.8 million patients in 2009 including more than 333,275 veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan (40,000 more than 2008).
- **Medical Services:** $30.97 billion, $1.2 billion above the President's request and $2.9 billion above 2008, to improve access to medical services for all veterans.
- **Mental Health Care and Substance Abuse**: Dedicate a minimum of $3.8 billion, $900 million more than 2008, to specialty mental health services for veterans with mental illness, PTSD, and for suicide prevention.
- **Priority 8 Veterans:** $375 million to increase enrollment of Priority 8 (low to middle income) veterans by 10 percent.
- **Mileage Reimbursement:** $133 million above the President's request to increase funding to raise the gas mileage reimbursement rate from 28.5 cents to 41.5 cents per mile for veterans traveling distances for care, and a freeze on the associated deductible.
- **Claims Processors:** Increased funding to hire 2,000 additional claims processors to work down the backlog of benefits claims and to reduce the 6 month time to process new claims.
- **Rural Veterans: Rural Health Initiative:** $250 million to begin a rural health initiative to improve access to medical services for veterans living in rural areas.
- **Prosthetics:** $1.6 billion, $250 million above 2008 and $116 million above the President's request, to provide veterans with appropriate prosthetic support and sensory aids given recent advances in technology.
- **Homeless Veterans:** $130 million to provide the additional case workers and medical services needed for our homeless veterans; including $30 million to hire additional personnel for the HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing Program.

This dramatic and historic funding increase translates into real improvements for our Nation's veterans:

- More than 15,000 new medical services staff since the beginning of 2007, including 2,018 new doctors and 6,549 new nurses.
- Establishment of 115 new Community Based Outpatient Centers (CBOCs) and 40 new Vet Centers with funding provided since the beginning of 2007.
- Increased focus on post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury, requiring the VA to spend at least $2.9 billion in FY08 on specialty mental health care. In FY09, that minimum will be increased to $3.8 billion for specialty mental health.
- Establishment of the first-ever polytrauma center in the southwestern U.S. (in San Antonio).
- Re-opening the doors of the VA to those non-service connected (Priority 8) veterans that had been barred from enrolling. The FY09 bill directs the VA to begin letting more veterans into the system – prioritizing those with lower incomes.
- 240% increase in non-recurring maintenance at VA facilities since January 2007 to prevent a Walter Reed-like tragedy from occurring there. The FY09 bill includes $1.1 billion for non-recurring maintenance at VA facilities.
- 28% increase in medical research, an additional $111 million per year, which supports an additional 320 research projects. These projects have been focused on the injuries and illnesses most important to the Iraq and Afghanistan veteran population.
- Dramatic increase the gas reimbursement from 11 cents to 28.5 cents/mile. In FY09, this could go up to 41.5 cents/mile and freeze the deductible at the 2008 level. (Before last year, the last increase in reimbursements was in 1979, when gas cost 90 cents/gallon.)
- Increased health care services for veterans (particularly our National Guard and Reserve veterans) in areas where the Veterans Health Administration does not currently offer services, including an additional $200 million increase for fee-based services and $250 million in funding for a new rural health initiative.

G.I. Bill for the 21st Century

The Post 9/11 G.I. Bill is the greatest overhaul of the G.I. Bill in more than 20 years. The bill fully restores education benefits for veterans to World War II levels, recognizes the sacrifice of our 1.8 million Reserve and National Guard troops by better aligning their educational benefits with their length of service, and also allows unused education benefits to be transferred to spouses and children. The Post 9/11 G.I. Bill provides tuition to veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars based on the cost of the most expensive four year public university in the state.

In May, President Bush had threatened to veto the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill. Through careful negotiations, the sponsors of the legislation were ultimately able to win the President's support. The Post 9/11 G.I. Bill, when fully implemented, will cost about $6 billion a year – which is what we spend in two and a half weeks in Iraq.

Returning veterans have shown their commitment to our country by their service and it is important to provide to our most dedicated citizens an opportunity to receive the education and training they missed while serving in the military. Providing veterans with the means to better themselves through educational opportunities has been a goal of this nation since 1944, when the first G.I. Bill of Rights laid a foundation for veterans to have the support necessary to readjust to civilian life. The Post 9/11 G.I. Bill will help make our veterans part of the economic recovery, much like the veterans of World War II. Now, in 2008, this country has come together to fully invest in the future of our heroes and support those who have borne the heaviest burdens of war.

Implementation of the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill came under fire by a number of veterans' service organizations after the VA announced it would outsource the processing of G.I. Bill claims to a private contractor. Since the announcement, the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity has held two oversight hearings focusing on the implementation of the bill. Committee members raised a number of concerns with the initial plan, including the quick decision to outsource the processing of G.I. Bill claims, lack of accountability over the contractor, lack of a contingency plan, and doubts about meeting the very tight timeline. Vigilant oversight will continue to ensure Congressional intent is fully implemented and the VA is afforded the resources to meet the needs mandated by Congress.

Supplemental Appropriations Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-252)
On June 19, 2008, the House passed the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 as part of the FY 2008 Supplemental, by an overwhelming vote of 416 to 12. The bill was signed into law on June 30, 2008.

Talking Points:

- The Post 9/11 G.I. Bill is the greatest overhaul of the G.I. Bill in more than 20 years, covering the cost of a college education at a public university.
- Reserve and National Guard benefits are tied to length of service – better reflecting the sacrifice of these citizen soldiers.
- Soldiers and veterans now have the option of transferring education benefits to their spouses and children.

Caring for Our Wounded Warriors

The Veterans' Mental Health Care and Other Care Improvements Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-387)
S. 2162 was signed into law on October 10, 2008. This comprehensive health care law addresses the many needs of our veterans and wounded warriors. The legislation expands mental health services, increases research through the National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and provides much needed counseling for families of veterans. This bill also mandates a program to help rural veterans get the health care they need closer to home.

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008 (P.L. 110-181)
H.R. 4986 was signed into law in January 2008 and contained provisions from the Wounded Warrior Assistance Act to improve the transition from active duty to veterans' status and improve VA health care for returning service members. The legislation provided an additional three years of VA healthcare eligibility for returning Iraq and Afghanistan veterans (for a total of five years). The bill also improved and expanded VA's ability to care for returning Iraq and Afghanistan veterans suffering from traumatic brain injury, including research, screening, care coordination, and working with non-VA providers to supply the care needed by our veterans. The bill provided plans for a cooperative approach for consolidating the disability and medical evaluation process for a more seamless transition from military duty to veteran status.

Joshua Omvig Veterans Suicide Prevention Act (P.L. 110-110)
The Joshua Omvig Veterans Suicide Prevention Act addresses the troubling increase of suicide in our veteran community. It offers comprehensive services to veterans and set up a 24-hour toll-free suicide hotline. The hotline has already served more than 30,000 veterans, family members, and friends.

Talking Points:

- Our troops deserve a seamless transition from active duty to the VA system. The majority of returning wounded will enter the VA system for their medical care and it is our test as a nation to provide the finest and most timely medical attention for our troops and veterans.
- There are hundreds of thousands of new veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. It is simply our duty as a Nation, when we put our men and women in harm's way, to care for them when they return.
- More than 40% of our veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom are entering the VA health care system. Of these veterans, 41% are seeking mental health care.

Providing for the Housing Needs of Veterans

Housing and Economic Recovery Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-298)
H.R. 3221 was signed into law on July 30, 2008. This comprehensive initiative prohibits foreclosure of property owned by a service member for nine months following a period of military service, provides a temporary increase to VA home loan limits, and provides funding for a VA grant program that assists disabled veterans needing to adapt their homes to accommodate their disabilities.

The Heroes Earnings and Relief Tax Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-245)
H.R. 6081 was signed into law on June 17, 2008. This bill provides $1.2 billion in targeted tax breaks to military personnel and their families, including tax relief under the Earned Income Tax Credit, clarifies the availability of recovery rebates for military families, and expands home ownership opportunities for veterans.

The Veterans Benefits Improvement Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-389)
S. 3023 was signed into law on October 10, 2008. This new law makes home loans more accessible to veterans by easing restrictions on the VA home loan guaranty program and increasing loan amounts for purchase and refinancing. The legislation eliminates the equity requirements for refinancing in response to the declining home values which prohibit many veterans from qualifying for the benefit.

The Veterans' Mental Health Care and Other Care Improvements Act of 2008 (P.L.110-387)
S. 2162 was signed into law on October 10, 2008. The legislation focuses greater attention on preventing homelessness and providing increased services for veterans experiencing homelessness. The bill expands and extends a valuable joint VA and Department of Labor program of referral and counseling services, ensures that the VA domiciliary program is capable of meeting the needs of the growing female veteran population, and provides necessary support to low-income veteran families that have made the transition to permanent housing. The bill also authorizes a funding increase of $150 million for homelessness programs.

Talking Points:

- The Housing and Economic Recovery Act of 2008 prohibits foreclosure for nine months after military service and provides a much needed increase to the VA home loan limit.
- The Veterans' Benefits Improvement Act of 2008 revamped the VA home loan program by enabling more veterans to refinance their existing high-risk loans with VA loans.
- The Heroes Earnings Assistance and Relief Tax Act of 2008 expands homeownership opportunities by making thousands of veterans eligible for low-interest loans.
- For many of our returning service members and veterans, the stress of deployment is still prevalent when they return home. Congress provided these heroes with not only the necessary time to readjust, but also ensured they have the opportunity to do this in the comfort and security of their own home.
- The number of homeless veterans today is atrocious and a national disgrace. There is much more that needs to be done to support our veterans as they transition from the battlefield back into their communities.

Increasing Benefits and Cleaning up the Benefits Backlog

The Veterans Benefits Improvement Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-389)
S. 3023 was signed into law on October 10, 2008. The legislation 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 bill also includes a pilot program that dramatically alters the way claims are processed for veterans. Fully-developed claims certified by a Veterans Service Officer are eligible for expedited processing allowing veterans to receive their benefit without waiting months and months.

The Veterans' Benefits Improvement Act of 2008 adds job protections for returning veterans, increases the opportunity for injured veterans to participate in independent living programs, allows deploying service members to terminate or suspend cell phone contracts without penalty, and provides additional support to veteran-owned small business when contracting with the government. The Veterans' Benefits Improvement Act of 2008 also provides grants to allow severely injured veterans and service members participate in the United States Olympic Paralympics program.

The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-161)
H.R. 2764 was signed into law on December 26, 2008. The bill dramatically increased the VA budget and focused greater attention on the disgraceful claims backlog. Already, the VA has hired 3,100 additional claims processors, with 2,000 more planned for this year.

Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2007 (P.L. 110-111)
Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-324)
The rates of compensation for veterans with service-connected disabilities and the rates of dependency and indemnity compensation for the survivors of certain disabled veterans were increased annually. (H.R. 1284 & S. 2617)

Talking Points:

- Too many veterans think that VA stands for Veterans Adversary instead of Veterans Advocate. Veterans have earned these benefits by serving our country. As a grateful nation, it is time we grant these claims in a timely fashion.
- The backlog of claims at the VA totals more than 600,000. Veterans have died while waiting for their adjudication. Veterans have had to give up their homes while waiting on the decisions of their claims. This is a national disgrace!
- Congress took a major step to comprehensively modernize the VBA claims processing system and arm it with the up-to-date tools it needs to process claims, while improving accountability, timeliness, and quality. Veterans, their families, and survivors deserve a benefits process that reflects the selfless sacrifices of those it serves.
- Our men and women should not get first-class weapons to fight only to come home and receive third-class benefits. We need to ensure that the benefits provided to our veterans are first-rate and uncompromised.

Providing Oversight of the VA

The House Committee on Veterans' Affairs took seriously its responsibility to make sure that veterans' programs and the VA were getting the job done for veterans.

Access to Mental Health Care
After rising rates of veteran suicide were reported, the Committee held a series of explosive hearings to investigate the manipulation of suicide data and to hold VA senior leadership accountable for their handling of the issues. The Committee scrutinized a series of PTSD-related issues, including a volatile e-mail from a VA employee suggesting that VA providers downgrade the diagnosis of PTSD to "adjustment disorders."

Oversight of VA Research
When Chantix, an anti-smoking drug, was linked to suicidal thoughts and aggressive and erratic behavior, the Committee investigated whether the VA adequately protected veterans during an on-going research study involving Chantix and veterans suffering from PTSD. Immediate action by the Committee determined that the VA failed to immediately contact veterans participating in the study to discuss the increased risk.

Oversight of Post 9/11 G.I. Bill Implementation
When the VA announced it was outsourcing the administrative implementation of the new GI Bill, the Committee held hearings to get at the facts. Concerns have been raised about the initial plan, including a lack of accountability over the contractor, lack of a contingency plan, and doubts about meeting the very tight timeline of an August 2009 implementation date.

Implementation of New Cooperative Approaches – Continuum of Care
Transmission of electronic medical records between the Pentagon and VA is critical for the continuum of care of our wounded warriors. This Congress mandated that VA and DOD establish electronic medical records that can be quickly and easily shared, and made tremendous strides increasing cooperation between these two federal agencies to improve benefits and services for active duty service members and veterans. More has been done this Congress to accelerate a seamless transition for service members and veterans, than the progress made in the past twenty years.