

Statement of Rep. Silvestre Reyes on H.R. 843, Injured Veterans Benefits Eligibility Act of 2004 April 29, 2004

Thank you Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member for allowing the Subcommittee to hear H.R. 843. I introduced this legislation during the 107th Congress, as Ranking Member of the Benefits Subcommittee and because of budget restraints and other priorities this legislation did not receive consideration.

With the leadership of the current Ranking Member, Mr. Michaud of Maine and his Subcommittee staff, this issue remained on the forefront of the Subcommittee's agenda. Amid the current budget situation, this bill may have easily been overlooked. And I thank the Chairman and Ranking Member for recognizing the importance and significance of its consideration to our veteran community.

Mr. Chairman, H.R. 843, the Injured Veterans Benefits Eligibility Act of 2004 is an important piece of legislation. This bill is intended to provide additional service-connected disability benefits for persons disabled by medical treatment or vocational rehabilitation provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs. This bill would also cover survivors of persons dying from such disabilities.

When veterans are disabled by medical treatment or vocational rehabilitation activities, they and their families suffer the same economic loss as veterans who are disabled by similar medical conditions during military service. But for their military service, these veterans would not be disabled. It is only right that they and their families receive the same benefits as veterans disabled during military service.

Under current law, these veterans and their survivors are eligible for VA service-connected cash compensation and survivors Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) benefits, but not other ancillary benefits provided to service-connected veterans. These ancillary benefits include health care for dependents under the "CHAMPVA" program and a \$10,000 policy of life insurance provided under the "Service-Disabled Veterans Insurance" program and education benefits for their children. The Congressional Budget Office has estimated that about 1,800 veterans and about 1,200 spouses (including surviving spouses) would qualify for these additional benefits. We should not ask veterans and their families to bear the financial burden of VA's negligence or carelessness.

Mr. Chairman I strongly urge my fellow colleagues of the subcommittee to favorably consider this legislation.