



## Chairman's Column



*Chairman Bob Filner*

Democrats promised a new direction for veterans, and in less than a year have lived up to that promise, passing major legislation and funding unprecedented increases.

Democrats made it a priority to meet the needs of veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, while never forgetting our heroes from previous conflicts.

Democrats provided the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) with a landmark increase for veterans' programs after years of inadequate funding, including the largest veterans' health care increase in the 77-year history of the VA as an independent agency.

The Democratic Party IS the party of veterans. We have shown that we will stand by our promises – to care for our veterans and to be an advocate

# House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Chairman Bob Filner

## *A New Direction for Our Nation's Veterans*

### Legislative Highlights of the 110th Congress

**H.R. 67, The Veterans Outreach Improvement Act of 2007**, establishes a grant program to assist states to better provide outreach services to veterans regarding benefits and services.

**H.R. 327, The Joshua Omvig Veterans Suicide Prevention Act**, provides VA with the tools it needs to better meet the needs of veterans who are at a greater risk of suicide.

**H.R. 612, The Returning Servicemember VA Healthcare Insurance Act of 2007**, provides an additional three years of free VA health care for veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

**H.R. 1315, The Veterans' Benefits Improvement Act of 2007**, provides specially adapted housing assistance to servicemembers transitioning to veteran status and creates a scholarship program for students seeking careers assisting in the rehabilitation of blind veterans.

**H.R. 2199, The Traumatic Brain Injury Health Enhancement and Long-Term Support Act of 2007**, improves and expands the VA's ability to care for veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with traumatic brain injuries (TBI) including research, screening, care coordination, and working with non-VA providers to provide optimal care.

**H.R. 2874, The Veterans' Health Care Improvement Act of 2007**, creates a transportation grant program for rural veterans, provides the VA with greater flexibility in meeting the mental health care and readjustment needs of veterans, and provides for assistance and support to low-income veterans and their families fighting homelessness.

### A New Direction for Funding the Needs of Our Veterans

- **The Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations Act of 2008** – An increase of \$6.7 billion over FY 2007 and \$3.6 billion over the Administration's request for veterans' programs
- **U.S. Troop Readiness, Veterans' Care, Katrina Recovery, and Iraq Accountability Appropriations Act, 2007** – \$1.8 billion for veterans' programs
- **FY 2007 Joint Funding Resolution** – A \$3.6 billion increase for VA medical care





# House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Chairman Bob Filner

## A NEW DIRECTION FOR OUR NATION'S VETERANS

### LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

110<sup>th</sup> Congress – First Session

#### Legislation Enacted Into Law

**P.L. 110-42 (S. 229) – A bill to designate a Federal building in Albuquerque, New Mexico, as the “Raymond G. Murphy Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center”**

- Names the VA Medical Center in Albuquerque, New Mexico, after Raymond G. Murphy, a Congressional Medal of Honor recipient.

*Signed into law on June 30, 2007*

**P.L. 110-28 (H.R. 2206) – U.S. Troops Readiness, Veterans' Care, Katrina Recovery, and Iraq Accountability Appropriations Act of 2007**

- Provides \$1.8 billion for veterans, including funding to address increased demand due to servicemembers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, mental health care, readjustment care, and polytrauma care.

*Signed into law on May 25, 2007*

**P.L. 110-5 (H.J. Res. 20) – Revised Continuing Appropriations Resolution, 2007**

- Provides VA funding for FY 2007, which ends on September 30, 2007, including a \$3.6 billion increase for veterans' health care.

*Signed into law on February 15, 2007*

**Legislation Passed by the House of Representatives**

**H.R. 2874 – Veterans' Health Care Improvement Act of 2007**

- Creates a transportation grant program for rural veterans, provides the VA with greater flexibility in meeting the mental health care and readjustment needs of veterans, and provides for assistance and support to low-income veterans and their families fighting homelessness.

*Passed by the House of Representatives July 30, 2007; Referred to the Senate*

**H.R. 2623 – To amend title 38, United States Code, to Prohibit the Collection of Copayments for all Hospice Care Furnished by the Department of Veterans Affairs**

- Prohibits the collection of copayments for all hospice care provided by the VA.

*Passed by the House of Representatives July 30, 2007; Referred to the Senate*

**H.R. 1315 – Veterans' Benefits Improvement Act of 2007**

- Provides specially adapted housing assistance to servicemembers transitioning to veteran status and creates a scholarship program for students seeking careers assisting in the rehabilitation of blind veterans.

*Passed by the House of Representatives July 30, 2007*

**H.R. 23 – Belated Thank You to the Merchant Mariners of World War II Act of 2007**

- Creates a Merchant Mariner Equity Fund, subject to the availability of appropriations, to provide a monthly benefit of \$1,000 to surviving Merchant Mariners of World War II.

*Passed by the House of Representatives July 30, 2007; Referred to the Senate*

**H.R. 2546 – To Designate the Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Asheville, North Carolina, as the “Charles George Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center”**

- Names the VA Medical Center in Asheville, North Carolina, after Charles George, a Congressional Medal of Honor recipient.

*Passed by the House of Representatives June 25, 2007; Referred to the Senate*

**H.R. 2602 – To Name the Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Facility in Iron Mountain, Michigan, as the “Oscar G. Johnson Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Facility”**

- Names the VA Medical Facility in Iron Mountain, Michigan, after Oscar G. Johnson, a Congressional Medal of Honor recipient.

*Passed by the House of Representatives June 25, 2007; Referred to the Senate*

**H.R. 366 – To Designate the Department of Veterans Affairs Outpatient Clinic in Tulsa, Oklahoma, as the “Ernest Childers Department of Veterans Affairs Outpatient Clinic”**

- Names the VA Outpatient Clinic in Tulsa, Oklahoma, after Ernest Childers, a Congressional Medal of Honor recipient.

*Passed by the House of Representatives June 25, 2007; Referred to the Senate*

**H.R. 2642 – Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations Act for FY 2008**

- FY 2008 VA funding bill provides for a \$4.4 billion increase over FY 2007 and \$1.9 billion over the Administration’s request for the Veterans Health Administration. Provides for \$43.2 billion for overall discretionary funding for veterans, an increase of \$6.7 billion over FY 2007 and \$3.8 billion over the Administration’s request.

*Passed by the House of Representatives June 15, 2007; Referred to the Senate*

**H.R. 2199 – Traumatic Brain Injury Health Enhancement and Long-Term Support Act of 2007**

- Improves and expands the VA’s ability to care for veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with traumatic brain injuries (TBI), including research, screening, care coordination, and working with non-VA providers to provide optimal care.

*Passed by the House of Representatives May 23, 2007; Referred to the Senate*

**H.R. 612 – Returning Servicemember VA Healthcare Insurance Act of 2007**

- Provides an additional three years (for a total of five years) of free VA health care for veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

*Passed by the House of Representatives May 23, 2007; Referred to the Senate*



**H.R. 1470 – Chiropractic Care Available to All Veterans Act**

- Requires the VA to provide chiropractic care and services to veterans through VA medical centers and clinics at no fewer than 75 medical centers by December 31, 2009, and all medical centers by December 31, 2011.

*Passed by the House of Representatives May 23, 2007; Referred to the Senate*

**H.R. 67 – Veterans Outreach Improvement Act of 2007**

- Establishes a grant program to assist states to better provide outreach services to veterans regarding benefits and services.

*Passed by the House of Representatives May 23, 2007; Referred to the Senate*

**H.R. 2239 – Early Access to Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Benefits Act**

- Extends vocational rehabilitation benefits to members of the Armed Forces who are hospitalized or receiving outpatient medical care, services, or who are determined to have a permanent, total disability incurred or aggravated in the line of duty; and, who are likely to be discharged or released from active service for such a disability.

*Passed by the House of Representatives May 23, 2007; Referred to the Senate*

**H.R. 1660 – To Direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to Establish a National Cemetery for Veterans in the Southern Colorado Region**

- Directs the VA to establish a national cemetery in Southern Colorado.

*Passed by the House of Representatives May 23, 2007; Referred to the Senate*

**H. Res. 392 – Urging Americans and People of all Nationalities to Visit the American Cemeteries, Memorials and Markers**

- This House Resolution urges Americans and people of all nationalities to visit the American Cemeteries, Memorials and Markers abroad, where the spirit of American generosity, sacrifice, and courage are displayed and commemorated.

*Passed by the House of Representatives May 23, 2007*

**H.Res. 413 – Recognizing the Service of United States Merchant Marine Veterans**

- This House Resolution recognizes, on National Maritime Day, the heroic and invaluable sacrifices that the U.S. Merchant Marine veterans have made to help ensure our nation's prosperity and safety.

*Passed by the House of Representatives May 22, 2007*

**H.R. 1585 – National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008**

- DOD authorization bill contains text of H.R. 1538, the Wounded Warriors Assistance Act of 2007 (except for veterans' mileage reimbursement provision).

*Passed by the House of Representatives May 17, 2007; Referred to the Senate*

**H.R. 1642 – Homeless Veterans Housing at Sepulveda Ambulatory Care Center Promotion Act**

- Directs the VA to ensure that a lease for a homeless housing project at the Sepulveda Ambulatory Care Center in North Hills, California, be operated as a sober living facility for veterans only.

*Passed by the House of Representatives May 7, 2007; Referred to the Senate*

**H.R. 1538 – Wounded Warrior Assistance Act of 2007**

- Requires assignment of a Medical Care Case Manager to each servicemember receiving outpatient care at a DOD facility; requires the DOD to provide a written transition plan for veterans' programs and the establishment of a formal process to transmit DOD records to VA on or before date of separation of servicemember. Calls for a joint separation and evaluation physical and fully interoperable medical records between VA and DOD. In addition, mandates reports on TBI classification, an evaluation of the Polytrauma Liaison Officer program, and an evaluation and report on the VA and DOD disability evaluation systems. Provides for increase in mileage reimbursement and elimination of deductible for veterans traveling for VA medical care.

*Passed by the House of Representatives March 28, 2007; Referred to the Senate. Senate amended the text of the bill and passed its version on July 25, 2007*

### **H.R. 327 – The Joshua Omvig Veterans Suicide Prevention Act**

- Directs the VA to develop and implement a comprehensive program to reduce the incidence of suicide among veterans, including counseling and treatment, training of VA health care personnel, screening veterans for risk factors of suicide, designation of suicide prevention counselors at all VA medical facilities, mental health research, and a 24-hour toll-free hotline.

*Passed by the House of Representatives March 21, 2007; Referred to the Senate*

### **H.R. 1284 – Veterans’ Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2007**

- Directs the VA to provide a cost-of-living adjustment (COLA), effective as of December 1, 2007, to the rates of disability compensation for veterans with service-connected disabilities and the rates of dependency and indemnity compensation for survivors of certain service-connected disabled veterans. Requires that the COLA be the same percentage as the increase in benefits provided under title II (Old Age, Survivors and Disability Insurance) of the Social Security Act, on the same effective date.

*Passed by the House of Representatives March 21, 2007; Referred to the Senate*

### **H.R. 797 – The Dr. James Allen Veteran Vision Equity Act**

- Enables veterans who receive veterans disability compensation for impairment of vision in one eye to be eligible to receive additional disability compensation for impairment of vision in the eye that is not service-connected, where that impairment in each eye is to a visual acuity of 20/200 or less, or of a peripheral field of 20 degrees or less (the definition of “legal blindness” adopted by all 50 States and the Social Security Administration). Requires the VA to provide HHS with information for comparison with the National Directory of New Hires for income verification purposes with respect to individuals under age 65 in order to determine eligibility for certain veteran benefits and services. Extends to 2009 VA’s authority to provide an educational allowance to persons performing qualifying work-study activities. Authorizes the VA, in lieu of furnishing a headstone or marker for the grave of a veteran in a private cemetery, to furnish a bronze “V” to be attached to a headstone or marker furnished at private expense.

*Passed by the House of Representatives March 21, 2007; Referred to the Senate*



**H. Con. Res. 5 – Expressing Support for the Designation and Goals of “Hire a Veteran Week” and Encouraging the President to Issue a Proclamation Supporting Those Goals**

- Resolution expresses support for the designation and goals of “Hire a Veteran Week.”

*Passed by the House of Representatives on January 31, 2007; Referred to the Senate*

**Legislation Passed by the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs**

**H.R. 760 – Filipino Veterans Equity Act of 2007**

- Restores full veterans’ status to Filipino veterans of World War II. This status was denied under the Rescission Acts of 1946. Permits Filipino veterans of World War II with service-connected disabilities and those eligible for Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) to receive the same benefits as other U.S. veterans. Permits Filipino veterans of World War II and survivors residing in the United States to receive pensions and death pensions paid at the same rate and under the same conditions as U.S. veterans while providing non-U.S. citizens residing outside the U.S. to be paid at a lower flat rate. Places mileage reimbursement rates for the veterans’ beneficiary program at the same level as government employees; increases maximum amount of insurance coverage for disabled veterans from \$20,000 to \$30,000; expands existing accelerated education benefit list to include commercial drivers’ license training; excludes benefits under the Montgomery GI Bill from being considered as income for purposes of determining eligibility for education grants or student loans; adds osteoporosis to disabilities presumed to be service connected in former POWs with PTSD; and, provides cost-of-living increases for temporary DIC for surviving spouses with children.

*Approved by the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs on July 17, 2007*





## A NEW DIRECTION FOR FUNDING THE NEEDS OF OUR VETERANS

### ***H.R. 2642, The Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations Act of 2008***

This bill sent a clear message to America's servicemen and women that House Democrats recognize our veterans as a cost of war. The bill provided the largest increase in funding for veterans health care in the 77 year history of the VA. The bill provided an increase of \$6.7 billion over FY 2007 and \$3.6 billion over the Administration's request for veterans' programs. The bill was passed by the House of Representatives on June 15, 2007.

### ***H.R. 2206, U.S. Troop Readiness, Veterans' Care, Katrina Recovery, and Iraq Accountability Appropriations Act of 2007***

In May, Congress approved and the President signed into law the emergency supplemental funding package that included \$1.8 billion for veterans' programs, including \$1.3 billion for veterans' health programs, mental health care for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans and VA health facility maintenance. The bill also included \$2.1 billion for military health care, including resources for Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury care and research.

### ***H.J.Res. 20, Further Continuing Appropriations for Fiscal Year 2007***

The bill that funded the government, including the Department of Veterans Affairs, for the remainder of the fiscal year provided \$32.3 billion for veterans' health care, an increase of \$3.6 billion over FY 2006 levels. This funding measure was made necessary by the inability of the Republican Congress to pass a veterans' funding bill last year. The Department of Veterans Affairs was forced to operate at prior year funding levels at the start of the fiscal year on October 1, 2006. This bill was signed into law in February 2007.



## A NEW DIRECTION FOR VETERANS OUTREACH

Chairman Bob Filner implemented a series of symposiums to raise the level of awareness on issues important to our nation's veterans and their dependents. In addition, Chairman Filner participated in a veterans service organization breakfast meeting sponsored by the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs R. James Nicholson. The breakfast meetings augment existing working relations among the Administration, House leadership, and veterans service organizations to give veterans a voice at the highest levels of government.

### **Symposium on Traumatic Brain Injury – July 18, 2007**

Chairman Filner led a symposium to address innovative and comprehensive ways to provide treatment for traumatic brain injury (TBI). TBI is considered the signature injury of the war in Iraq. Among veterans and service members from Iraq and Afghanistan treated at Walter Reed for injuries of any type, approximately 65% have TBI as a primary diagnosis or simultaneous injury. Participants discussed the need for a coordinated effort for case management for TBI patients, not just during the initial injury phase, but throughout the life of the patient. The importance of educating and training family members on what to expect from their TBI patient was emphasized during the symposium.

### **Symposium on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder – May 16, 2007**

The Chairman held a symposium to examine the issue of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in light of the need to improve mental health service delivery to veterans. The symposium brought together experts with wide ranges of expertise to help identify the specific issues facing our veterans. This was an excellent venue to bring about productive problem solving strategies for the veteran community.

### **Roundtable Discussion on the Claims Backlog at the VA – May 23, 2007**

The Committee held a roundtable discussion between experts and interested stakeholders to discuss various ideas to reduce the claims backlog and improve the claims process. It takes an average of 177 days for a disabled service member to get a VA claim processed – nearly double the 89.5 day wait civilians face in a private health insurance system. The roundtable provided stakeholders an opportunity to present new and unique ways of addressing the growing claims backlog by bringing together top Administration officials, professors, legal experts and veteran service representatives.



**Stakeholder's Summit – February 12, 2007**

Chairman Filner held a "Stakeholder's Summit" where various veterans' service organizations (VSOs) were invited to participate. While this did not replace the formal process of testifying before the committee, it did offer the VSOs the opportunity to raise important issues in an informal setting. The meeting was held on February 12, 2007, and included issues such as Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, improving education benefits, the claims backlog, elimination of the Survivor Benefit Plan Dependency Indemnity Clause, and employment opportunities for new and existing veterans.

**Reinstatement of Joint Hearings**

In January 2007, the Democratic congressional leadership from both the House of Representatives and Senate made good on their commitment to America's veterans. In a joint statement, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, House Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Bob Filner, and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Daniel Akaka announced the reinstatement of the traditional joint hearings process in which veterans and military service organizations appear before the Veterans' Affairs Committees. Having the benefit of the joint hearings is a welcomed change from the previous Congress where the GOP leadership drastically limited the ability of allowing veterans' service organizations to testify before the Committee.

The joint House and Senate hearings are traditionally held in the spring, after the President submits his budget request to Congress. The hearings are generally tied to the veterans' service organizations' national meetings occurring in Washington, D.C.



# House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Chairman Bob Filner

## **A NEW DIRECTION FOR HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS HEARINGS**

Under Democratic leadership, the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs has fought to ensure that Congress keeps the promises that have been made to our veterans, including the new generation of veterans returning from active duty along with past generations of veterans who rely on the VA for the benefits they have earned and deserve. After seven months, the Committee has held more than 40 hearings to better understand the needs of America's heroes on a wide-range of topics that affect veterans every day.

### ***Full Committee Hearings***

- The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Budget Request for Fiscal Year 2008
- Equity for Filipino Veterans
- H.R. 23, the "Belated Thank You to the Merchant Mariners of World War II Act of 2007"
- The Results of the President's Task Force on Returning Global War on Terror Heroes
- Priority Group 8 Veterans
- The Future of VA Health Care in South Louisiana, Field Hearing in New Orleans, LA
- PTSD and Personality Disorders: Challenges for the VA

### ***Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee Hearings***

- Oversight Efforts of the VA Inspector General: Issues, Problems and Best Practices at the Department of Veterans Affairs
- Information and Security Management at the Department of Veterans Affairs – Current Effectiveness and the Need for Cultural Change
- Servicemembers Seamless Transition into Civilian Life – The Heroes Return
- Surgical Services at the W.G. (Bill) Hefner VA Medical Center in Salisbury, North Carolina
- Sharing of Electronic Medical Records Between Department of Defense and Department of Veterans Affairs
- SES Bonuses: Ensuring VA's Process Works
- VA Internal Contracting Oversight Deficiencies
- IT Inventory Management



### ***Health Subcommittee Hearings***

- The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Fiscal Year 2008 Health Budget
- Polytrauma Center Care and the TBI Patient: How Seamless is the Transition Between VA and DoD and Are Needs Being Met?
- Access to VA Health Care: How Easy is it for Veterans? Addressing the Gaps
- State of VA's Long-Term Care Programs
- Issues Facing Women and Minority Veterans (Joint Hearing with DAMA)
- Vet Centers
- Gulf War Exposures

### ***Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs Subcommittee Hearings***

- The Impact of OEF/OIF on the VA Claims Process
- Helping Those Left Behind: Are We Doing Enough for the Parents, Spouses and Children of Veterans
- Veterans Cemeteries: Honoring Those Who Served
- The Challenges Facing the U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims
- Issues Facing Women and Minority Veterans (Joint Hearing with Health)

### ***Economic Opportunity Subcommittee Hearings***

- Performance Review of Education, Loan Guaranty, VR&I and VETS Programs
- Education Benefits for the National Guard & Reserve Members of the U.S. Armed Forces
- State Approving Agencies
- Accelerated Education Benefits for Veterans
- Specially Adaptive Housing
- Federal Procurement and the Three Percent Set Aside
- Contract Bundling Oversight

### ***Joint House and Senate Hearings***

February 27, 2007 – Legislative Presentation

- Disabled American Veterans

March 6, 2007 – Legislative Presentation

- Veterans of Foreign Wars

March 8, 2007 – Legislative Presentation

- Paralyzed Veterans of America
- Jewish War Veterans
- Blinded Veterans Association
- Vietnam Veterans of America
- Non Commissioned Officers Association
- Air Force Sergeants Association

March 29, 2007 – Legislative Presentation

- American Veterans (AMVETS)
- American Ex-Prisoners of War
- Military Order of the Purple Heart
- Fleet Reserve Association
- The Retired Enlisted Association
- Gold Star Wives of America
- Military Officers Association of America
- National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs

May 29, 2007 – Field Hearing in New Philadelphia, OH

- Issues Facing Veterans in the Rural Areas of Appalachia