



Veterans' Update

Your quarterly newsletter on Veterans' Issues from
Congresswoman Ginny Brown-Waite

June, 2006

Greetings,

The Veterans' Update is a newsletter created to keep you abreast of issues and legislation important to the veterans of Florida's 5th Congressional District. I hope that you find this issue informative and educational. If you need any help with the benefits or care you receive from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), please do not hesitate to contact my Brooksville district office at 1-866-G-WAITE-5.

Sincerely,



Rep. Ginny Brown-Waite



M.C.


Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-0903
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DATA SECURITY BREACH AT THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

On May 22, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced that as many as 26.5 million veteran records were stolen from a laptop computer. This information was removed from the VA without permission, and the employee responsible has been fired. While this is no consolation for the potential loss of your records, you should know that the VA has moved swiftly to hold those employees responsible accountable for their actions.

The House Veterans' Affairs Committee held a hearing as soon as Congress found out about the theft to question VA officials about this incomprehensible breach in security. I made it clear during my remarks that the VA's inadequate security measures and failure to enact strong cyber security protocols contributed to this theft. It saddens me that this situation has damaged the trust between American veterans and the VA.

While computer experts work to determine what files were taken, and the police and the FBI attempt to find the stolen computer, there are several important things you can do to protect yourself from possible identity theft.

First, you should request your free annual credit report to determine if there has been any unauthorized activity on your credit history. You can request a report online at www.annualcreditreport.com or call to request a report toll-free at 1-877-322-8228. You can also write to request a report at Annual Credit Report Request Service, P.O. Box 105281, Atlanta, GA 30348-5281.

The second thing you should do is to place fraud alerts in your file to let potential creditors and others know that you may be a victim of identity theft from the VA security breach. A fraud alert can make it more difficult for someone to get credit in your name because it tells creditors to follow certain procedures to protect you. To place a fraud alert in your file for 90 days, please call one of the three major credit rating bureaus. The other two will be notified automatically. For more detailed information about the identity theft report, visit www.consumer.gov/idtheft.

- Equifax: 1-877-576-5734; www.equifax.com
- Experian: 1-888-397-3742; www.experian.com/fraud
- TransUnion: 1-800-680-7289; www.transunion.com

Finally, the VA established a toll-free hotline for veterans to call and request information about the security breach. That toll-free number is 1-800-FED INFO (333-4636). The call center will operate from 8 am to 9 pm (EDT), Monday-Saturday as long as it is needed. The call center will be able to handle up to 20,000 calls per hour (260,000 calls per day). Veterans with Internet access can also go to www.firstgov.gov as well as www.va.gov/opa to get more information on this matter.

RECORD SETTING BUDGET FOR VETERANS PASSES U.S. HOUSE

I was proud and honored to vote for a FY 2007 Veterans' Affairs budget that increased nearly 10 percent and brought total spending to historic levels once again. This legislation passed the House on May 19, 2006 on a unanimous and bipartisan vote of 395-0. Since 1995, the budget authority for the VA has increased from \$37.6 billion to this year's level of \$77.9 billion. During this time, I have fought for increased funding for veterans' health services, education programs, assistance for dependents, and other important benefits.

You should also know that the House once again rejected the President's proposals to implement enrollment fees and increase prescription drug co-pays for category 7 and 8 veterans. It is unfair to ask the hard-working men and women who sacrificed so much defending our country to pay more for their health care without increasing *quality* or access to care. Enrollment fees make the VA care more

expensive without making it better. I was glad to see that other Members felt the same as I do and rejected these new fees for veterans.

Finally, the VA budget included \$25.4 billion for medical services, an 11.6 percent increase over last year's levels. Included in this historic increase is \$3 billion for specialty mental health care, including PTSD screening and treatment. Rest assured that as the budget process continues that I will continue to be outspoken in support of veterans and their health care needs.

RIBBON CUTTING AT THE NEW AND EXPANDED CBOC IN ZEPHYRHILLS

On Monday, May 8, 2006 I participated in a ribbon cutting for the Zephyrhills VA Community Based Outpatient Clinic. As any veteran who has waited for a VA appointment knows, Pasco County is located in one of the fastest growing veteran population areas in Florida. Nearly 100 new patients per month seek enrollment in the Pasco County area and over 55,000 veterans reside in the region. This new clinic is a victory for veterans and will greatly help the veterans of Pasco County and throughout the area.



Rep. Brown-Waite and VA Officials Cut the Ribbon at New Zephyrhills VA Clinic

My first order of business when I joined the House Veterans' Affairs Committee was to address the problems veterans faced with widespread waiting lists and months-long delays at our local VA clinics. Some faced waiting periods of up to three months for routine medical care. This delay was unacceptable to me and to Florida's veterans.

The good news is that the new Zephyrhills CBOB ribbon cutting is just the latest in a long list of health care victories for 5th District veterans. In addition to the Zephyrhills facility, since January of 2003 the VA has opened a new clinic in The Villages, expanded

and renovated the clinic in Brooksville, relocated and enlarged the clinic in Leesburg, and recently dedicated a new and expanded clinic in Citrus County. I will continue my efforts to help meet the needs of Florida's veteran population and help bring area veterans the access to care and resources that they deserve and need.

AREA VETERANS CAN APPLY FOR THE NEW COMBAT ACTION BADGE

For those veterans who served their country in theater during the Global War on Terror from September 8, 2001 to the present, there is a new Combat Action Badge available from the Department of Defense. The Combat Action Badge provides special recognition to soldiers who personally engage the enemy, or are engaged by the enemy during combat operations. The bayonet and grenade are associated with active combat. The oak wreath symbolizes strength and loyalty.

To qualify for the new Badge, soldiers must have performed assigned duties in an area where hostile fire pay or imminent danger pay is authorized. They must have been personally present and actively engaging or being engaged by the enemy, and performed satisfactorily in accordance with the prescribed rules of engagement.



Image of the Combat Action Badge

To see if you qualify for the new Combat Action Badge, veterans who live in the 5th Congressional District must provide records showing their military service time. Interested veterans should contact my Brooksville District Office at (352) 799-8354 to complete the necessary paperwork and request forms.

Veterans' Certification Legislation Introduced in U.S. House

Each year, over 180,000 American soldiers make the decision to leave the armed forces. After serving honorably in defense of our country, many of these individuals seek employment in the civilian world, hoping to capitalize on the skills they have gained during their time in the military. However, the job search for veterans can be difficult – the average unemployment rate for recently discharged veterans is 6.9 percent, compared with the national average of 4.7 percent.

Unfortunately, many employers do not understand the skills an individual obtains while serving in the armed forces. Moreover, many civilian occupations require that employees be certified or licensed within their field, something that is difficult to obtain while serving in the armed forces. This can render an individual ineligible for a job they could easily do. For example, a soldier who has driven a truck during their time in the service might not be eligible to drive a commercial truck because they do not possess the requisite certification.



Rep. Brown-Waite and Florida Soldiers Serving in Iraq Discuss Military Needs and Ongoing Operations in the Global War on Terror

As you might guess, this can leave veterans in undesirable situations. Some veterans find employment in positions for which they are overqualified or in fields that have nothing to do with their skill set. Although the Departments of Defense, Labor, and Veterans Affairs have worked to address this issue, we must do more.

On April 27, 2006, I introduced H.R.5220 the *Veterans' Certification and Licensure Act*. This legislation would create an advisory committee within the Department of Labor to focus on facilitating the seamless transition of military personnel into civilian employment through licensure and certification programs. The advisory

committee would include experts from the business world, human resources industry, labor unions, and veterans' service organizations.

On the day of my bill's introduction, the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs held a hearing in which officials from the DOL and VA testified on a number of bills, including H.R. 5220. After significant dialogue between members of the committee, executive branch officials, and VSOs, I am pleased to report that we will be working closely to achieve tangible results on this matter in the coming months.

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<http://brown-waite.house.gov>

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