

The Hoosier Legionnaire
The American Legion, Department of Indiana

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THE HOOSIER LEGIONNAIRE

For God and Country

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Says Changes Benefit Veterans

Congressman Responds To Legion Criticism

*By Steve Buyer,
Chairman Committee
on Veterans' Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives*

In September, I wrote National Commander Tom Bock that I looked forward to working with him and The American Legion to preserve the quality of care for veterans and to improve the system where it falls short.

In past years, veterans' service organizations and military service organizations (VSOs and MSOs) offered their views and resolutions in joint hearings of the House and Senate Veterans' Committees. These hearings occurred

Editor's Note: During Commander Martin's February 28 meeting with Rep. Steve Buyer during the Washington Conference, the commander agreed to Buyer's request that his views on veterans issues covered recently in the Hoosier Legionnaire be published. Accordingly, Rep. Buyer's comments are reproduced here, unedited. They do not necessarily reflect the views of The American Legion, Department of Indiana nor does their publication suggest or represent an endorsement of the views. Watch for reaction and comment in future issues of The Hoosier Legionnaire.

weeks after we developed our "budget views and estimates" response to the president's VA budget request.

I decided to move the testimony earlier in the budget process after discussing it with representatives of most national VSOs and MSOs at a veterans' summit I held at Carlisle Barracks, PA, last fall. Engaging VSOs and MSOs

earlier in the budget process increases their influence in developing the annual VA budget.

Unfortunately, The American Legion chose not to attend. Contrary to some reports, two of the Legion's national leadership received email invitations from us about two weeks before the summit. A past national com-

mander was mistakenly invited instead of Commander Bock. I have expressed my regret to him. The two Legion recipients acknowledged receiving the invitations. It is assumed that they shared them with Commander Bock. With this same notice, other VSOs and MSOs managed to attend.

I always accept constructive criticism, but not the insulting letter from Commander Bock ... This is a classic case which we have all experienced, where the one who criticizes a decision the most harshly is the one who failed to appear – or even designate someone to appear – at

the meeting. As a life member of The American Legion, I had expected better. Nonetheless, more accountability has been brought into the budget process through this new hearing procedure.

The new hearing schedule allows VSOs and MSOs to present their resolutions, views on the budget and legislative priorities in early February, just after the president sends his budget request to Congress. That request this year reflected improved use of data, methodology, and balanced policy expectations – lessons learned from the shortfalls discovered in my

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Continuation

Congressman Offers His Perspective On Work For Veterans

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committee last summer.

On February 15 and 16, 19 VSOs and MSOs, including The American Legion, testified together before my committee. Their counsel was invaluable. I look forward to having them back in September to review the past year and discuss legislative priorities for the year ahead. These hearings, which will be scheduled not to conflict with other veterans' hearings in the Senate, will coincide with the administration's development of its budget proposal for the upcoming fiscal year.

Our budget views and estimates for fiscal year 2007 recommends a budget that reflects our priorities: to care for veterans with service-connected disabilities, those with special needs, and the indigent; ensure a seamless transition from military service to civilian life; and provide veterans with every opportunity

to live full and healthy lives.

We recommend almost \$1.9 billion above the administration's request, including \$600 million to begin modernizing the GI Bill. The GI Bill does not reflect today's realities. Those in the Guard and Reserves, who are bearing a significant share of the burden in Iraq and Afghanistan, often lose their benefits when they muster out. We also recommend increases for medical programs, more claims processors, medical and prosthetic research, and for improvements at our national cemeteries.

We will also increase the budget \$795 million to make up the gap left by our decision not to include enrollment fees and increased co-pays. The full views and estimates document may be read at <http://veterans.house.gov/legislation/109/budrep07.pdf>.

We are doing the hard work of ensuring a strong VA. Too

often all one hears is the negative, yet there is progress and we should be proud of the men and women of our VA. The department is streamlining its information technology system, now a patchwork quilt of old and new. Increased efficiency will lower costs and enable doctors and nurses to give veterans better care.

You may have seen our work in Congress to prevent hateful demonstrators from disrupting the sanctity of military funerals. Our legislation is constitutionally sound and offers proportional punishments to offenders. We hope to have it on President Bush's desk by Memorial Day.

I welcome your comments. Please email us at veteransviews@mail.house.gov. You increase accountability by getting everyone involved, and you get a better product. That's what veterans deserve, and that's what we're delivering.