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October 21, 2003

Honorable C. W. Bill Young
Chairman
House Committee on Appropriations
H-218, U.S. Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

Honorable David R. Obey
Ranking Democratic Member
House Committee on Appropriations
1016 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman and Mr. Obey:

We write to you and all House Conferees to request your support for \$1.3 billion in fiscal year 2004 medical care funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health care system, included in the Senate-passed emergency supplemental measure, H.R. 3289, now in conference. Obtaining additional VA medical care funds is a matter of utmost urgency to millions of veterans of our armed forces and of the highest priority to Members of this Committee. Failure to restore at least this level of funding would mean dis-enrollment of as many as one million veterans from VA care, closure of thousands of VA nursing home beds, and even longer waits for veterans seeking VA health care.

Earlier this year a coalition of Members attempted to restore \$1.8 billion to the strapped VA health care system. We believe that Congress should keep the promise it made in the Congressional Resolution on the Budget for Fiscal Year 2004, H. Con. Res. 95, which accommodated an increase of \$1.8 billion for these programs. This amount would have replaced funds that were proposed to be taken from veterans through higher co-payments and annual enrollment fees, Administration proposals rejected by both houses of Congress.

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With America at war overseas, members of our active duty armed forces are being wounded daily. These servicemembers will be cared for initially by the Department of Defense (DOD), but ultimately the burden of care, restoration and rehabilitation will fall on the VA. Today, VA struggles to find resources to care for tens of thousands of veterans waiting at least six months for initial access to VA care. Our Committee hearings on the readiness of DOD and VA to absorb and transition wounded and ill veterans leave no doubt that veterans, Reservists and Guard members are not getting the kind of seamless transition they deserve.

We urge you to ensure that no less than the Senate-passed level of funding is provided in the conference agreement to address the current emergency in caring for our Nation's veterans. Failure to meet the needs of veterans seeking health care today would have long-term consequences on our ability to recruit the Nation's future defenders.

Sincerely,

Chris Smith

Kare Evans

Tommy Ammons

Ciro D. Rodriguez

Fred Strickland

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John Rozano

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October 21, 2003

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