

## SENATOR JOE BIDEN ON VETERANS

*“Whether serving in peacetime or during conflict, our nation’s veterans trained and worked long hours, often times spent long periods away from their families, and served loyally to defend our country. Our nation’s democracy and freedom exist because of the achievements and sacrifices of our veterans. We owe them an immeasurable amount of gratitude.”*

– Senator Joe Biden

### THE BIDEN PLAN: RESPECTING THOSE WHO PROTECT US

What our wounded veterans need, more than anything else, is the best medical care our country can offer. Senator Biden believes our nation has a sacred obligation to provide proper medical care for the hundreds of thousands of brave men and women who bear the physical and emotional scars of serving their country at war.

#### ENACTED LEGISLATION

During the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress, Senator Biden helped enact numerous measures to improve the delivery of health care services for our nation’s veterans, help those returning from Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) readjust to civilian life and assist family members who provide much needed love and support for our wounded warriors.

**Ensuring Adequate Facilities and Medical Budgets Now and In the Future:** A series of articles in *The Washington Post* in 2007 exposed delays in care that soldiers faced and highlighted horrible living conditions that many endured while they were receiving outpatient treatment for their wounds. To help ensure that this situation never occurs again, Senator Biden was successful in getting a provision attached to the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2008 that is designed to prevent budget cuts to military medical facilities while the nation is at war.

**Improving Care for Veterans Returning From Iraq and Afghanistan:** Senator Biden cosponsored both the stand-alone Dignity for Wounded Warriors Act as well as the Dignified Treatment of Wounded Warriors amendment that was attached to the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal year 2008. The NDAA contained numerous measures improving the provision of services for veterans, including:

- Authorizing medically retired servicemembers to receive active duty health benefits for an additional 3 years (5 years instead of 2 years).
- Directing the Secretaries of the Departments of Defense (DOD) and Veterans Affairs (VA) to jointly develop and implement procedures and standards for the transition of recovering servicemembers from care and treatment through DOD to the VA.
- Establishing the DOD-VA Interagency Program Office to jointly develop and implement electronic record systems that allow full interoperability of personal health care information between DOD and the VA.
- Requiring pilot programs to revise and improve the disability evaluation system, including a pilot program where a sole disability determination is done using VA criteria.

- Establishing a board to review disability determinations of service members separated between September 11, 2001, and December 31, 2009, with a disability rating of 20% or less.

**Improving Services for Troops and Veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and/or Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI):** The RAND Corporation recently estimated that approximately 300,000 returning servicemembers from Iraq and Afghanistan meet criteria for either PTSD or depression and approximately 320,000 veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan may have experienced TBI during deployment. Senator Biden helped Congress enact several measures to help these wounded warriors, including:

- Establishing a protocol for pre-deployment assessment and documentation of cognitive function of members that can be used for comparison after deployment to assist in the diagnosis of TBI.
- Requiring individual rehabilitation and community reintegration plans for veterans with TBI.
- Establishing a pilot program for assisted living services for veterans with TBI.
- Directing the VA to conduct research and educate and train VA health care personnel in recognizing and treating TBI.
- Requiring the Secretary of Defense to establish centers of excellence for TBI, PTSD and military eye injuries.
- Requiring initial mental health evaluations for veterans or returning servicemembers no later than 30 days following a request for such an evaluation.
- Requiring a National Academy of Sciences study of the physical and mental health and other readjustment needs of members who served in OIF and OEF and their families.

**Providing Upgraded Educational Benefits:** Recognizing the courage and dedication of those serving today in Iraq and Afghanistan, Senator Biden worked to provide veterans who have served since September 11, 2001, with a level of educational benefits approximate to that given to service members after World War II by cosponsoring the ***Post 9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act*** (S. 22). Included in the 2008 supplemental funding bill and signed into law by President Bush, the legislation creates a new G.I. Bill by:

- Paying the full cost of tuition up to the most expensive in-state public school.
- Providing a stipend for housing based on the cost of living near the college.
- Making the education benefits equal for both active duty service members and National Guard and Reservists, based on their total amount of active service.
- Guaranteeing veterans would have up to fifteen years, compared to ten years under the current G.I. Bill, after they leave active duty to use their educational assistance entitlement.
- Allowing the educational benefits to be transferred to immediate family members after six years of service.

**Securing Family Involvement and Stability:** Senator Biden knows that the emotional support that family members give their loved ones, along with the personal, medical and convalescent care they provide, is invaluable and goes a long way in a wounded soldier's recovery. Senator Biden believes that we must ensure that family members of our wounded warriors are not forced to choose between providing care for their loved ones or keeping their jobs. Senator Biden helped pass legislation:

- Guaranteeing 6-months of Family and Medical Leave coverage for families of injured soldiers
- Requiring DOD to develop—in handbook and electronic form—a description of the compensation and other benefits available to a member and his or her family upon the member's separation or retirement as a result of a serious injury or illness
- Extending eligibility for medical care at a military treatment facility to a family member of a recovering member if the family member is caring for the member.
- Establishing a wounded warrior research center to provide recovering servicemembers, their families, and their primary caregivers a single point of contact for assistance in reporting deficiencies in covered military facilities, obtaining health care services, receiving benefits information, and any other difficulties encountered

## **PENDING PROPOSALS**

In addition to the measures listed above that have been enacted in the last year and a half, Senator Biden supports other initiatives that will help honor the sacrifice of our country's servicemembers and veterans.

**Ensuring Veterans and Soldiers Are Treated In the Best Facilities:** Senator Biden introduced legislation that complements the much need measures included in the National Defense Authorization Act. The Effective Care for Armed Forces and Veterans Act helps meet the needs of our troops and veterans for decades to come, by:

- Prohibiting public-private competitions of maintenance services at military medical complexes while the nation is at war to prevent the backlog of maintenance orders that plagued Walter Reed Medical Center.
- Requiring the Department of Veterans Affairs to report on long-term care needs for the next 50 years, since hundreds of thousands of additional veterans with multiple care needs will be coming into the system, and we must be ready to help them.
- Initiating studies into the feasibility of making TBI a “presumptive condition” for service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.
- Requiring the Army to present complete plans for Walter Reed closure before any action is taken.

**Reforming the Handling of Disability Claims:** The backlog of pending claims and the delays in the appeals process for veterans is simply unacceptable: at the end of the 2006 fiscal year, rating-related compensation claims were pending an average of 127 days and appeals resolutions took an average of 657 days to resolve. In order to reduce these backlogs and the hardship they impose on veterans and their families Joe Biden proposes:

- Updating and simplifying the disability determination and claims processing system. Building on the recommendations of the President's Commission on Care for America's Returning Wounded Warriors, periodic reviews of veterans' disability status should be undertaken to ensure proper compensation.
- Allowing survivors to step in and pursue undecided claims or those under appeal that were pending at the time of a veteran's death. This would prevent claims from having to start over again and delaying benefits for the surviving family members.
- Requiring the VA to review educational and training requirements for claims adjudicators. With an increasing number of veterans citing more disabilities in their claims, the claims are becoming more complex and the claims processors may need more training to complete the claims process in a timely fashion.
- Requiring the VA to publish the number of claims that are rejected each year in each region. This could help bring transparency to the claims process and explain variations in disability ratings in different areas of the country.

**Assisting With Job Placement and Educational Services:** Many veterans come home from Iraq and Afghanistan and find it difficult to find civilian work. Reservists who have been deployed often return home to find their employer has gone out of business. Sadly, the national unemployment rate for young veterans is three times the national average. We also need to help older veterans who are coping with a changing global economy and may need job training for new careers. To help with job placement and educational services for veterans Joe Biden advocates:

- Increasing funding and resources for programs like Helmets to Hardhats and Troops to Teachers, and establishing new initiatives like a Troops to Nurse Teachers program, to aid veterans in their transition to jobs in the construction, teaching and nursing professions.
- Providing grants to non-profit organizations and veterans service organizations that provide job training and job placement services.
- Allowing Reservists and National Guard members who have been deployed while enrolled in college to return to school with the same academic standing that they had before they were called up. In addition, if after returning home they decide they do not want to continue their schooling and instead find employment, they would have at least 12 months to begin paying student loans to help overcome the strain of deployment to a combat zone.

## THE BIDEN RECORD: 3 DECADES OF KEEPING THE PROMISE

**Ensuring Delaware Veterans Have Access to VA Facilities:** Senator Biden knows how important it is for Delaware's veterans to be able to access needed health care services in their own state. As such, the Senator fought to ensure that the VA hospital in Elsmere remained open and did not suffer cutbacks in services during the Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services (CARES) review of VA facilities around the country. Senator Biden was also instrumental in opening the community-based outpatient clinics in Dover and Georgetown.

**Guaranteeing Funding for Health Care:** A top priority of veterans groups, and one Senator Biden has consistently supported, is to change the budget for the VA, so they are guaranteed a proper budget and do not have to fight every year for adequate funding. He would have a mandatory

formula for allocating money to the VA, instead of having their budget be a discretionary item that can be cut. In the recent past, the Administration grossly underestimated the number of Iraq veterans requiring care, but Senator Biden helped to pass a double-digit funding increase, as recommended by several veterans' service organizations.

**Helping Veterans With Agent Orange Related Illness:** For three decades Senator Biden has worked to get veterans of Vietnam who were exposed to Agent Orange and other toxins access to the care and benefits they deserve. He has pressured the VA to resolve claims, expanded compensation for veterans injured by exposure, extended eligibility for inpatient and outpatient care and worked to make sure that children suffering from Spina Bifida because of parent exposure to Agent Orange are eligible for disability benefits. He will continue to fight to make sure our Vietnam veterans receive adequate care and benefits and ensure that the best available medical and scientific evidence is used by the VA when determining disability claims.

**Advocating for Concurrent Receipt:** Senator Biden believes there is no reason for one payment to reduce the other. He has repeatedly co-sponsored legislation to authorize full concurrent receipt, allowing disabled military retirees to receive full military retirement pay in addition to VA disability compensation.

**Helping Military Retirees, Reservists With TRICARE:** Senator Biden has supported numerous measures to allow federal civilian and military retirees to pay TRICARE health insurance on a pre-tax basis. He has also supported extending TRICARE coverage to members of the National Guard and Reserves who have no other source of health insurance.

**Improving Job Opportunities for Veterans:** When our service men and women return from Iraq they will need jobs, and Senator Biden has always championed efforts to increase job opportunities for members after they leave the service. Senator Biden has supported initiatives like Helmets to Hardhats and the Troops to Teachers program to help veterans find jobs after military service and he recently co-sponsored legislation to establish the Troops to Nurse Teachers program, encouraging nurse veterans to become nurse teachers and help train the next generation of nurses.

**Celebrating Veterans:** Too many American children lack family ties to the military. Senator Biden wants to better educate America's youth on the accomplishments of our veterans. Every year he has introduced a resolution designating National Veterans Awareness Week, the week of Veterans Day.

**Honoring Our World War II, Korean, and Vietnam War Veterans:** Senator Biden co-sponsored the legislation to build the World War II, Korean, and Vietnam War Memorials, and throughout his career has supported numerous measures to honor the service and dedication of the country's soldiers and veterans. He also co-sponsored legislation several times to grant a federal charter to the Korean War Veterans Association.