



Thoughts From . . .

CAPITOL HILL

By Congressman Rodney Alexander



March 6, 2007

Uncovering Needs Can Boost Congress' Progress in Supporting Veterans

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Recent reports exposing the poor condition of facilities at Walter Reed Army Medical Center have unleashed more than shock – and disappointment – from citizens across our nation.

Certainly, the reports did reveal the urgent need for improvements at these facilities, but the response has also shown that our often-divided country continues to be united on one front – the importance of supporting our veterans.

Immediately after the story broke, the United States Army as well as Congress took swift action to repair the substandard state of the buildings as well as the flaws in leadership responsible for their maintenance. As Congress works together to resolve this specific problem, I believe the concerns we have collectively expressed can propel us forward in continuing to work to provide the men and women who serve our country with the resources and top-notch medical care they need and deserve.

Though the news about Walter Reed is alarming, it is important not to lose sight of all the good Congress has accomplished for veterans in recent years – and all the good that we can achieve in the near future.

Under the past several Congresses, funding for veterans' medical care has increased from \$18.9 billion in 2000 to \$31 billion in 2006. Since 2000, spending per veteran has increased 85 percent from \$1,715 to \$3,167.

In addition to providing more funding for medical care, Congress has also enacted policies that have addressed other needs of veterans. For example, a few years ago, Congress passed the most extensive change in concurrent receipt policy in more than a hundred years. For the first time, military retirees who are 50 percent or more disabled, plus all Purple Heart recipients, began receiving concurrent receipt of their retired pay and disability compensation. Over the next decade, the legislation will provide \$22.1 billion to eligible persons.

This year, Congress is poised to continue this progress in veterans' benefits. The President's FY08 Budget Proposal includes proposals to provide \$39.6 billion in appropriations for veterans' programs, which is a \$3.1 billion increase (8.5 percent) over last year's amount.

On the heels of the Walter Reed controversy, Congress will certainly be keeping the needs of veterans foremost in mind as we work together on drafting and passing the FY08 Budget. As a member of the House Budget Committee and the House Appropriations Committee, I remain committed to passing a budget that sufficiently provides for veterans' programs and medical facilities across our country – facilities such as the Alexandria VA Medical Center in Pineville.

Hindsight cannot erase the inadequacies of the past, but by uncovering some of the greatest needs, Congress is better prepared to meet the needs of veterans in the future.

After all the sacrifices our veterans have made throughout our nation's history, they deserve nothing less.

U.S. Rep. Rodney Alexander, R-Quitman, represents the 5th Congressional District and serves on the House Appropriations Committee and the House Budget Committee. He can be reached at the Monroe District Office (318-322-3500), the Alexandria District Office (318-445-0818) or Washington, D.C. (202-225-8490.) Visit Alexander's Web site at www.house.gov/alexander or write him at 316 Cannon House Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20515.

###