



# House Veterans' Affairs Committee

## Report Card: 1st Quarter

SUBJECT	GRADE
<b>Veteran Funding</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ <i>FY 2007 Joint Funding Resolution</i> – A \$3.6 billion increase for VA medical care</li> <li>◆ <i>U.S. Troop Readiness, Veterans' Health and Iraqi Accountability Act of 2007</i> – \$1.7 billion for veterans' programs</li> <li>◆ <i>FY 2008 Budget Resolution</i> – An increase of \$6.6 billion over FY 2007 and \$3.5 billion over the Administration's request for veterans' programs</li> </ul>	A+
<b>Joint Hearings</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Reinstated under Chairman Bob Filner, giving the veteran community the opportunity to present their legislative initiatives</li> <li>◆ Held 4 joint hearings</li> </ul>	A+
<b>Legislation</b> – Passed by the House Veterans' Affairs Committee <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ H.R. 327 – <i>The Joshua Omvig Veterans Suicide Prevention Act</i></li> <li>◆ H.R. 797 – <i>The Dr. James Allen Veteran Vision Equity Act</i></li> <li>◆ H.R. 1284 – <i>The Veterans Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2007</i></li> <li>◆ H.R. 1538 – <i>The Wounded Warrior Assistance Act</i></li> </ul>	A+
<b>Hearings</b> - Held by the House Veterans' Affairs Committee <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Education Benefits for National Guard &amp; Reserve Members</li> <li>◆ Traumatic Brain Injury and Poly-trauma Centers</li> <li>◆ Impact of OIF/OEF on the VA Claims Process</li> <li>◆ Service Members Seamless Transition into Civilian Life</li> <li>◆ Performance Review of Education, Load Guaranty, VR&amp;E and VETS Programs</li> <li>◆ Information and Security Management at the Department of Veterans' Affairs</li> <li>◆ VA Inspector General – Budget and Best Practices</li> <li>◆ Filipino Veterans</li> <li>◆ Department of Veterans' Affairs FY 2008 Health Budget</li> </ul>	A+
<b>Veteran Outreach</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Held the first summit of veterans service organizations to discuss legislative priorities in the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress</li> <li>◆ Participated in breakfasts with veterans service organization community</li> <li>◆ A health care symposium in April</li> </ul>	A+
<b>Veterans Benefits</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Increased funding, improving health benefits, and COLA</li> <li>◆ A bronze "V" for veteran grave stones</li> <li>◆ Increased travel benefits from 11¢ to 48.5¢</li> </ul>	A+
<b>Oversight</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Increased the budget of Inspector General's (IG) office</li> <li>◆ Initiated IG investigations into nursing home neglect</li> <li>◆ GAO investigations into contracting abuses and data sharing</li> <li>◆ Investigations into information security, procurement problems, and medical records sharing between DoD and VA</li> </ul>	A+
<b>Education</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Extended VA work study program until FY 2012</li> <li>◆ Introduced H.R. 1102 Total Force GI Bill</li> </ul>	A+



## House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Chairman Bob Filner

### **Veteran Funding:**

#### *H.J.Res. 20, Further Continuing Appropriations for Fiscal Year 2007*

The bill that funds the government, including the Department of Veterans Affairs for the remainder of the fiscal year, provides \$32.3 billion for veterans' health care, an increase of \$3.6 billion over FY 2006 levels. The funding measure was made necessary by the inability of the Republican Congress to pass a veterans' funding bill last year. VA has been forced to operate at prior year funding levels since the new fiscal year started on October 1, 2006.

#### *H.R. 1591, U.S. Troop Readiness, Veterans' Health, and Iraq Accountability Act, 2007*

This bill provides \$1.7 billion for the Department of Veterans Affairs, including funds for veterans medical programs.

#### *H.Con.Res. 99, Budget Resolution for Fiscal Year 2008*

The budget for 2008 would increase VA health care by \$6.6 billion over 2007 figures. This increased funding is \$3.5 billion over the Administration's request. Democrats have demonstrated unwavering support for our nation's veterans by working for the largest annual increase in VA health care spending in 77 years.

"In the first three months of this Congress, we have demonstrated that Democrats recognize veterans' health care as a cost of war," said Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Bob Filner. "In February, we passed a Continuing Resolution that included \$3.6 billion above the 2006 baseline. Then, last week the House passed a Supplemental Appropriations Act for 2007 that included \$1.7 billion for key veterans programs."

### **Veteran Outreach:**

Chairman Filner implemented a "Stakeholder's Summit" where various veterans' service organizations were invited to participate. While this does not replace the formal process of testifying before the committee, it does offer the VSOs the opportunity to raise important issues in an informal setting. The first such meeting was held on February 12, 2007 in which issues such as post traumatic stress disorder, improving education benefits, claims backlog, elimination of the Survival Benefit Plan Dependency Indemnity Clause, and employment opportunities for new and existing veterans were discussed. The series of roundtable hearings will continue throughout the 110th Congress.

Veterans service organizations that participated in the Stakeholders Roundtable Discussion: The American Legion, Vietnam Veterans of America, Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Blinded Veterans

Association, Jewish War Veterans, Military Order of the Purple Heart, National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, National Association of Uniformed Service, National Association for Black Veterans, and Gold Star Wives.

In addition, Chairman Filner will be participating in future veterans service organization breakfast meetings sponsored by the Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary R. James Nicholson. The breakfast meetings will augment existing working relations among the Administration, House leadership, and veterans service organizations to ensure that issues important to our veterans are heard at the highest levels of government.

Also, the Chairman is spearheading a Health Care Symposium scheduled for April 2007 to discuss the pressing health care issues of the newest generation of veterans. The symposium will center its discussion on mental health issues such as traumatic brain injury and post traumatic stress disorder.

### **Reinstatement of Joint Hearings:**

In January 2007, the Democratic congressional leadership from both the House of Representatives and Senate made good on their commitment to America's veterans. In a joint statement issued, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, House Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Bob Filner, and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Daniel Akaka announced the reinstatement of the traditional joint hearings process in which veterans and military service organizations appear before the Veterans' Affairs Committees. Having the benefit of the joint hearings is a welcomed change from the previous Congress where the GOP leadership drastically limited the ability of allowing veterans' service organizations to testify before the Committee.

The joint House and Senate hearings have traditionally been held in the spring, after the President submits his budget request to Congress. The hearings are generally tied to the veterans' service organizations national meetings occurring in Washington, D.C.

The House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees have scheduled joint hearings to receive legislative presentations from Veterans of Foreign Wars, Paralyzed Veterans of America, Jewish War Veterans of the United States, Blinded Veterans Association, AMVETS, Ex-POWs, Military Order of the Purple Heart, Vietnam Veterans of America and the Fleet Reserve Association.

### **Legislation Passed by the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs:**

The Chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, Bob Filner (D-CA), brought four bills to the House floor that would improve veterans' benefits. The House passed the following bills: the Joshua Omvig Veterans Suicide Prevention Act, the Dr. James Allen Veteran Vision Equity Act, the Veterans Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2007 and the Wounded Warrior Assistance Act of 2007.

*H.R. 327, the Joshua Omvig Veterans Suicide Prevention Act*

This bill directs the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to develop and implement a comprehensive program to reduce the incidence of suicide among veterans.

Specifically, this bill provides: training for personnel with interaction with veterans, screening of veterans for risk factors of suicide, counseling and treatment, designation of suicide prevention counselors at all VA medical centers, mental health research on veterans, 24-hour toll free hotline, outreach and education to veterans and dependents, and peer support counseling.

*H.R. 797, the Dr. James Allen Veteran Vision Equity Act*

Allows veterans who receive veteran's disability compensation for impairment of vision in one eye to be eligible to receive additional disability compensation for impairment of vision in the eye that is not service-connected, where the impairment in each eye is to a visual acuity of 20/200 or less or of a peripheral field loss of 20 degrees or less (the definition of "legal blindness" adopted by all 50 states and the Social Security Administration.)

*H.R. 1284, the Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2007*

This legislation would increase effective as of December 1, 2007, the rates of compensation for veterans with service-connected disabilities and the rates of dependency and indemnity compensation for the survivors of certain disabled veterans.

*H.R. 1538, the Wounded Warrior Assistance Act of 2007*

This bill provides the staffing, training, and oversight mechanisms needed to ensure that our wounded warriors feel secure that they will always receive committed quality care and that the system will not fail them. Among various improvements, this legislation would: require the assignment of a medical case manager and servicemember advocate to servicemembers receiving outpatient medical care, establish a toll-free hot line to report deficiencies in medical facilities caring for servicemembers or their dependents, and improve training standards for health care professionals, case managers, and servicemember advocates.

You might recall recent news articles that have raised serious concerns about the welfare of returning troops. The series of articles detail poor living conditions for servicemembers recovering at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. along with obstacles facing servicemembers as they recover from debilitating injuries. The legislation sets the stage for much needed reform of administrative processes that will restore confidence in the integrity and efficiency of the disability evaluation system and begin the process of achieving a truly seamless transition of service members to the Department of Veterans Affairs programs.

**Veterans Benefits:**

Chairman Filner had led the Committee in increasing veterans benefits by increasing funding, improving health benefits, and Cost of Living Allowance.

In addition, the Chairman allowed for an amendment to be included in H.R. 797, the Dr. James Allen Veteran Vision Equity Act. This amendment would provide families the option of choosing a Bronze V in lieu of a VA headstone for graves already marked by a private marker. Currently, many private cemeteries do not allow for a second marker on a grave, and the proposed Bronze V will ensure our nation's veterans are given the proper recognition they deserve for their service to our country.

**Oversight:**

Increased resources and manpower of the Inspector General's (IG) office by approving an increase in the budget; initiated IG investigations into nursing home neglect, and approved continued GAO investigations into contracting abuses and data sharing; and began a series of investigations into information security, procurement problems, and medical records sharing between the Department of Defense and Department of Veterans Affairs.

**Education:**

In December 2006, Congress extended the VA Work Study Program which provides VA work study benefits to veteran and dependent students volunteering at VA approved work sites such as State Approving Agencies, state/national veteran cemeteries, and state veteran homes until June 30, 2007.

Chairman Filner offered a manager's amendment to H.R. 797, the Dr. James Allen Veteran Vision Equity Act, which would expand the VA Work Study Program to June 30, 2012. This legislation passed the House of Representatives by a vote of 424-0.

**House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Hearings:**

***Full Committee Hearings***

March 15, 2007 – Markup

1. H.R. 327 – to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to develop and implement a comprehensive program designed to reduce the incidence of suicide among veterans.
2. H.R. 612 – to amend title 38, United States Code, to extend the period of eligibility for health care for combat service in the Persian Gulf War or future hostilities from two years to five years after discharge or release.
3. H.R. 797 – to amend title 38, United States Code, to improve compensation benefits for veterans in certain cases of impairment of vision involving both eyes, and for other purposes.
4. H.R. 1284 – to increase, effective as of December 1, 2007, the rates of compensation for veterans with service-connected disabilities and the rates of dependency and indemnity compensation for the survivors of certain disabled veterans.

February 15, 2007 – Hearing on Full Equity for Filipino Veterans

February 8, 2007 – Hearing on the Department of Veterans Affairs Budget Request for Fiscal Year 2008

***Joint House and Senate Hearings***

March 29, 2007 – Legislative Presentation

- American Veterans
- American Ex-Prisoners of War
- Military Order of the Purple Heart
- Fleet Reserve Association
- The Retired Enlisted Association
- Gold Star Wives of America
- Military Officers Association of America
- National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs

March 8, 2007 – Legislative Presentation

- Paralyzed Veterans of America
- Jewish War Veterans
- Blinded Veterans Association
- Vietnam Veterans of America
- Non Commissioned Officers Association
- Air Force Sergeants Association

March 6, 2007 – Veterans of Foreign Wars Legislative Presentation

***Subcommittee Hearings***

March 22, 2007 – Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity  
Education Benefits for National Guard and Reserve Members

March 15, 2007 – Subcommittee on Health  
Traumatic Brain Injury and Poly-Trauma Centers

March 13, 2007 – Subcommittee on Health  
Markup on H.R. 612 and H.R. 327

March 13, 2007 – Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs  
The Impact of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom on the VA  
Claims Process

March 13, 2007 – Subcommittee on Disability Assistance & Memorial Affairs  
Markup on H.R. 797 and H.R. 1284

March 8, 2007 – Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigation  
Servicemembers Seamless Transition into Civilian Life

March 7, 2007 – Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity  
Performance Review of Education, Loan Guaranty, Vocational Rehabilitation and  
Education, and Veterans Education and Training Service Programs

February 28, 2007 – Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigation  
Information and Security Management at the Department of Veterans Affairs

February 15, 2007 – Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigation  
VA Inspector General – Budget and Best Practices

February 14, 2007 – Subcommittee on Health  
Department of Veterans Affairs Fiscal Year 2008 Health Budget