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October 1, 2008

Keeping the Promise: Accomplishments for Our Nation's Veterans in the 110th Congress

Dear Democratic Colleague:

When I became Chairman of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, the VA was strained to its breaking point by years of chronic underfunding and a "business as usual" attitude. The Committee set out an aggressive agenda to identify the needs of our veterans and to ensure that the promises we made to them were kept. The Committee held 107 hearings, 50 percent more than the previous Congress, and we followed through and passed 75 quality veterans' bills – more than the previous two Congresses combined.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have created hundreds of thousands of veterans. It is simply our duty as a Nation, when we put our men and women in harm's way, to care for them when they return. Although this Democratic Congress has focused on the issues affecting our returning service members, I vowed, when I became Chairman, to never forget the service and sacrifice of our veterans from previous conflicts – and we have lived up to that promise. Thanks to our efforts, the VA is in a better position today to care for all of our veterans.

Our aggressive agenda culminated last week in the passage of comprehensive legislation to improve health care and benefits for our veterans. I have attached a list of accomplishments that this Democratic Congress has been able to achieve. We were not able to do all that we wanted to, but we did a lot, and next Congress, working together, we plan on building upon our successes and making sure that we honor our warriors by taking care of them when they return. We will keep our promise to our Nation's heroes of the past, present and future.

Sincerely,



CHAIRMAN
 House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

1. A G.I. Bill for the 21st Century

- The Post 9/11 G.I. Bill is the greatest overhaul of the G.I. Bill in over 20 years, covering the cost of a college education at a public university.
- Reserve and National Guard benefits are tied to length of service better reflecting the sacrifice of these citizen soldiers.
- Soldiers and veterans now have the option of transferring education benefits to their spouses and children.

2. Address the Housing Needs of Veterans

- Sweeping legislation provided veterans with the necessary time to readjust from the battlefield back into their communities without fear of losing their home.
- The Housing and Economic Recovery Act of 2008 prohibits foreclosure for nine months after military service and provides a much needed increase to the VA home loan limit.
- The Veterans' Benefits Improvement Act of 2008 revamped the VA home loan program by enabling more veterans to refinance their existing high-risk loans with VA loans.
- The Heroes Earnings Assistance and Relief Tax Act of 2008 expands homeownership opportunities by making thousands of veterans eligible for low-interest loans.

3. A Budget Worthy of Our Veterans

- The cost of the war must include the cost of the warrior. This Democratic Congress added \$16.3 billion dollars worth of new money for veterans' health care and services.
- House Democrats did more to increase veterans funding in the last 2 years than Republicans did in the last 12 years.
- This unprecedented increase proves that supporting our troops and veterans is not just a slogan for Democrats – it is our mandate!

4. Addressing Health Care Treatment & Access

- Over 40% of our veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom are entering the VA health care system. Of these veterans, 41% are seeking mental health care.
- The Joshua Omvig Veterans Suicide Prevention Act addresses the troubling increase of suicide in our veteran community. It offers comprehensive services to veterans and set up a 24-hour toll-free suicide hotline. The hotline has already served more than 30,000 veterans, family members, and friends.
- The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008 provides an additional three years of VA health care eligibility for returning Iraq and Afghanistan veterans (for a total of five years) and improves and expands the VA's ability to care for returning Iraq and Afghanistan veterans suffering from traumatic brain injury.

- The Veterans' Mental Health and Other Care Improvements Act of 2008 expands mental health services, increases research through the National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and provides much needed counseling for families of veterans. This bill also mandates a program to help rural veterans get the health care they need closer to home.

5. Increasing Benefits for Veterans

- Last year Congress dramatically increased the gas reimbursement from 11 cents to 28.5 cents a mile. This year, we will increase the veteran's mileage reimbursement rate to the same as a government employee and freeze the required deductible at last year's level.
- The Veterans' Benefits Improvement Act of 2008 adds job protections for returning veterans, increases the opportunity for injured veterans to participate in independent living programs, allows deploying service members to terminate or suspend cell phone contracts without penalty, and provides additional support to veteran-owned small business when contracting with the government.
- The Veterans' Benefits Improvement Act of 2008 also provides grants to allow severely injured veterans and service members participate in the United States Olympic Paralympics program.

6. Cleaning up the Benefits Backlog

- The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2008 increased the VA budget and focused added attention on the disgraceful claims backlog. Already, the VA has hired 3,100 additional claims processors, with 2,000 more planned for this year.
- The Veterans Disability Benefits Claims Modernization Act of 2008 provides essential reforms to bring the claims processing system up-to-date for more accurate and timely delivery of benefits to veterans, families, and survivors.
- The Veterans' Benefits Improvement Act of 2008 also includes a pilot program that dramatically alters the way claims are processed for veterans. Fully-developed claims certified by a Veterans Service Officer are eligible for expedited processing allowing veterans to receive their benefit more expeditiously.

7. Oversight of the Department of Veterans Affairs

- The House Committee on Veterans' Affairs took seriously its responsibility to make sure that veterans' programs and the VA were getting the job done for veterans.
- After rising rates of veteran suicide were reported, the Committee held a series of explosive hearings to investigate the manipulation of suicide data and to hold VA senior leadership accountable for their handling of the issues.
- The Committee scrutinized a series of PTSD-related issues, including a volatile e-mail from a VA employee suggesting that VA providers downgrade the diagnosis of PTSD to "adjustment disorders."

- When Chantix, an anti-smoking drug, was linked to suicidal thoughts and aggressive and erratic behavior, the Committee investigated whether the VA adequately protected veterans during an on-going research study involving Chantix and veterans suffering from PTSD. Immediate action by the Committee determined that the VA failed to immediately contact veterans participating in the study to discuss the increased risk.
- When the VA announced it was outsourcing the administrative implementation of the new GI Bill, the Committee held hearings to get at the facts.

8. New Cooperative Approaches – Seamless Transition and Continuum of Care

- Transmission of electronic medical records between the Pentagon and VA is critical for the continuum of care of our wounded warriors. This Congress mandated that VA and DOD establish electronic medical records that can be quickly and easily shared, and made tremendous strides increasing cooperation between these two federal agencies to improve benefits and services for active-duty service members and veterans.

“It has never been more important than during this time of war to keep the promises that have been made to our veterans. This Democratic-led Congress will continue our aggressive approach as we work together to provide our veterans with the benefits that they have earned and deserve.”

Bob Filner