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Klein unveils vets' benefits proposal



Photo by Chris Matula/The Post

Photo: Congressman Ron Klein greets World War II bomber navigator A. Edward Wilen, right, as Klein unveils his Five Star Veterans' Priority Plan at Veteran's Park in Delray Beach Monday, April 28, 2008. In Klein's opinion, the proposal will ensure that those who have served the nation will receive the benefits for which they are entitled.

By DON JORDAN
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DELRAY BEACH — U.S. Rep. Ron Klein, D-Boca Raton, unveiled a five-point blueprint today to expand health care and other benefits for military veterans.

Dubbed the Five-Star Veterans' Priority Plan, the initiative includes mandating funding for veterans' health care, strengthening benefits for National Guard and Reserves members, reviving and updating the G.I. Bill, eliminating the backlog of disability claims and guaranteeing health benefits for returning service members.

Klein delivered his message to more than a dozen veterans and volunteers gathered this morning in a gazebo overlooking the Intracoastal Waterway at Veterans Park.

"There is a broad recognition in the United States right now with a lot of the things that have been going on as it relates to veterans ... that we need to do better," Klein said. " These are big bold things but every one of them is common sense and the right thing to do."

Klein is one of about 300 senators and representatives co-sponsoring bills in the Senate and House that would update the 64-year-old G.I. Bill by expanding educational benefits to veterans that have served since Sept. 11, 2001. The companion bills are both at the committee level.

Klein acknowledged that some of the ideas would be costly, but argued they have broad support, even in a tight budgetary time. Klein would not estimate the cost of any of his proposals, saying they would vary based on the numbers of veterans served.

"This is what I would call priority budgeting," he said. "If we're going to ask people to fight wars for us ... we need to make sure that we have the necessary support in place so that when people do sign up, they're going to know that we have the equipment when we send them over to Iraq and Afghanistan, and we've got the services in place when they come home, so they and their families will be supported."

Iraq War veteran James Nappier, who was wounded in a 2004 mortar attack in Ramadi that killed five sailors, said he still deals with his injuries but is learning to work around them through therapy at the Veterans Administration Medical Center in Riviera Beach.

The petty officer 2nd class in the Navy credited Klein for working for local veterans and said quality health care for the nation's veterans shouldn't be up for debate.

"Every veteran earned it. All the way back, every single war, has been promised this ... if we do come back wounded, we'll be taken care of," Nappier said. "They should not have to fight for what they are promised."