

# Veterans Day 2003

## **On Life Support: The Quiet Crisis Of Veterans Health Care** **By Dennis J. Kucinich**

Today, we celebrate Veterans Day, a day to pay tribute to the heroic efforts of the brave men and women who have honorably served our nation. Today is a day of remembrance and rededication. And today, of all days, must rededicate ourselves in the words of President Abraham Lincoln, "to care for him who shall have borne the battle."

Our nation has a quiet crisis growing larger everyday. Currently, over 60,000 Veterans nationwide are waiting up to six months or longer for an appointment at VA Hospitals. In addition, 14,000 veterans entitled to expedited claims have waited longer than 15 months for action. The men and women who fought for our freedom and liberty abroad should not have to fight their own government at home for the veterans benefits and health care to which they are entitled and which they have earned.

In the current budget for the fiscal year 2004, the President and the Republican majority in Congress have broken their promise to provide an additional \$1.8 billion for veterans health care. In addition, they have also proposed an increase in the prescription drug co-payments and enrollment fees on veterans seeking to access health care. This is unacceptable.

We must end the national disgrace of the crisis in veterans health care. This is why this year I proposed a budget package with in additional \$3 billion above the President's budget for veterans health care. It is also why I have joined many of my Democratic colleagues in the House in co-sponsoring HR 2569, a comprehensive package of benefits designed to honor contributions of those who have served our nation in the Armed Services.

The package would block increases in prescription drug co-payments and block the new \$250 enrollment fees that were proposed by the Administration and included in the Republican congressional budget resolution. The package would set clear guidelines, and enforce existing standards, for healthcare decisions by the Veterans Administration. The plan would also require the VA to make healthcare appointments in 30 days, and would require \$500 per month payments when disabilities claims lag for six months or more.

In addition, we must guarantee that a mandatory level of funding be set for the Department of Veterans Affairs Health Care System. I support legislation that would establish a funding formula based on the consumer price index so that funding increases would automatically occur as the numbers of patients grow and as prices rise. Currently, veterans health care spending is discretionary, subject to the political winds of change, and not based on need. Our promise and commitment to our nation's veterans cannot be discretionary, but must be mandatory.

Our nation's veterans deserve more than empty promises and failed political rhetoric. The brave men and women who have fought for the freedoms that we enjoy every day deserve the very best our nation has to offer. George Washington two centuries ago stated, "The willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional to how they perceive the veterans of earlier wars were treated and appreciated by their nation."

Today, more than ever Washington's words ring true. We can and must do more to provide health care for our nation's veterans.