

## News from Congressman

# Chet Edwards

**Chairman, House Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies**

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### OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN CHET EDWARDS

#### *Full Committee Markup of the FY2011 Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act*

(Washington, D.C.) – U.S. Representative Chet Edwards made the following statement at the House Appropriations Committee markup of the fiscal year 2011 Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act:

It is a privilege to present to you the fiscal year 2011 Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations bill, which passed our Subcommittee unanimously last week. I want to salute the Republicans and Democrats on our Subcommittee for putting the interests of our troops and vets above partisanship on this bill.

The bill continues our Committee's commitment to honor in a meaningful way the service and sacrifice of our troops, our veterans and their families. It also builds on the historic new commitments we have made to our servicemen and women and veterans since 2007, whether it is funding a new GI bill, increasing VA health care by over \$20 billion a year; opening VA health care to more middle income veterans or committing more for military construction since any three year period since 1948, including modernizing our DOD hospitals, building new day care centers for military children or fully funding BRAC.

I want to salute our colleague and ranking Subcommittee Member, Zach Wamp, who has a genuine heart for our troops and veterans, has championed their cause and has continued the bipartisan traditions of our Subcommittee. Zach, it has been a personal privilege to work with you, and our veterans and troops will miss your leadership in Congress in their behalf. Mr. Wamp has been ably assisted this year by Mr. Crenshaw, and I thank you, Mr. Crenshaw for your continued leadership on this Subcommittee.

In addition to Mr. Wamp, I would also like to acknowledge another subcommittee Member who is leaving our ranks – Mr. Kennedy. Patrick, your dedication to the plight of veterans struggling with mental health issues has been inspirational. You have truly made a difference in the lives of countless veterans, and I am confident your commitment to our veterans and troops will continue in the years ahead. I also want to thank Mr. Lewis for his support of our Subcommittee's work and for his countless contributions to our troops and veterans.

I want to express a special thanks to Chairman Dave Obey. If one person in the entire Congress were to receive the designation of "unsung hero" for America's veterans, it would be Mr. Obey. Everything we have accomplished over the past 3 ½ years on our Subcommittee was made possible by his leadership. Mr. Obey, in partnership with Speaker Pelosi and America's veterans, has worked to provide historic, unprecedented funding increases for this Subcommittee and veterans' health care and benefits. Millions of veterans for decades to come will have a better quality of life because of Chairman Obey's powerful, effective advocacy behind the scenes where it truly counted. He has never sought credit for

his instrumental role in behalf of our veterans, but Mr. Obey, you have earned it, and, today, we join together to thank you for making a historic difference for our veterans and their families.

### **Summary of FY 2011 Bill**

I would now like to summarize some of the key provisions of the FY 2011 Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations bill.

Overall this bill totals \$77.3 billion in discretionary spending for FY 2011, which includes \$1.3 billion in emergency appropriations for Overseas Contingency Operations. The total amount provided is the same as the Administration's request. It is \$745 million less than fiscal year 2010, largely due to this being the final year of BRAC 2005. In addition, the bill continues last year's first ever advance appropriations for three VA medical accounts by including \$50.6 billion for fiscal year 2012.

We have also included a number of oversight provisions in bill language to ensure that taxpayer funds are spent effectively and efficiently. For example, we continue our robust funding of the Office of Inspector General. In an era when Americans are asking us to cut spending and reduce our deficits, this bill reflects our continued willingness to provide the resources our service members and veterans deserve, but with a careful eye to the management of those resources by the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs. Whether in Afghanistan or here at home, taxpayers' dollars should be spent wisely and for the purposes for which they are intended.

### **Military Construction**

The fiscal year 2011 recommendation in the bill for base Military Construction, Family Housing, and BRAC is \$18.7 billion, equal to the Administration's request. Within this amount, we have fully funded the request of \$2.4 billion for the 2005 BRAC round, which is scheduled for completion in September 2011. It also provides funds to support additional construction requirements for operations in Afghanistan at \$1.3 billion, as requested by the Administration. While the bill total equals the President's request, we have used bid savings and other offsets to redirect funds to key investments supporting our military men and women. We have made a number of adjustments to individual line items in the request and reinvested these savings in high priority Subcommittee initiatives such as:

- \$190 million to accelerate the Army's program to replace training barracks for those young soldiers who have stood up to defend our country. In the Army's budget, this program would not be complete until fiscal year 2017.
- \$200 million to continue the Subcommittee's Guard and Reserve initiative begun last year. This money will go to the highest unfunded military construction priorities of the commanders of the reserve components of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force. This bill would provide more than \$1.8 billion for Guard and Reserve military construction, an increase of \$228 million over last year. This would be the largest single appropriation for Guard and Reserve military construction since at least 1964.

Another Subcommittee initiative is to ensure that the funds for construction in Afghanistan are used in a manner that serves the interests of both our troops and the taxpayers. We do so by providing for the transfer of \$10 million from the overseas contingency operations funds to the DOD Inspector General for the purpose of auditing military construction projects in Afghanistan.

### **Department of Veterans Affairs**

The millions of veterans and their families who depend on the VA for medical care, disability payments, and educational benefits will be well served by this bill. It provides \$57.0 billion in discretionary funding, an increase of \$3.9 billion, which is 7.4 percent higher than fiscal year 2010. With this increase, Congress will have increased the baseline for the VA since January 2007 by \$27 billion or 70 percent. Through our efforts the VA will be able to accomplish its key mission of providing quality medical care to over 6 million veterans in 2011.

The bill provides an unprecedented funding increase to support the processing of more than one million VA disability claims. More than 4,000 additional permanent claims processors, an increase of almost 25%, will target the growing backlog of claims, as the VA continues to develop an information system to speed claims resolution. With this increase, the Committee has provided funding for 10,200 new claims processors since the start of the 110th Congress. These

additional resources are especially vital as the wave of new Agent Orange presumptive disability claims hits the system as a result of recent findings by the Institute of Medicine.

For fiscal year 2011, the Veterans Health Administration is funded at \$48.8 billion. In addition, the bill provides advance appropriations for fiscal year 2012 in the amount of \$50.6 billion. These funds will allow the Department to increase access to timely services, ensure safer facilities and improve treatment, including:

- \$5.2 billion in 2011 and \$5.6 billion in 2012 for mental health services;
- \$4.2 billion in 2011 for homeless veteran services of which \$800 million is for specific homeless programs and \$3.4 billion is for medical services. For 2012 \$4.6 billion is provided for these programs;
- \$250 million in both 2011 and 2012 to increase access for veterans in rural areas;
- \$590 million for medical research in 2011, including funds to address the critical needs of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom veterans;
- \$5.7 billion in 2011 and \$5.4 billion in 2012 to address the recurring and non-recurring maintenance needs at our medical facilities; and funding to support the family caregiver benefits for disabled veterans recently enacted into law.

We have made cuts to VA programs that aren't working and used those funds to bolster programs that need more resources. As one example, this bill includes \$3.2 billion for Information Technology Systems, which is \$85 million below both the budget request and the fiscal year 2010 level. While recognizing the need for the systems development efforts underway, we are disappointed that the work continues to fall behind schedule, leaving large unobligated balances. The reduction in IT has been used to increase funding for minor construction, national cemeteries, the Inspector General, and education claims processors.

By accelerating the minor construction program to address the continuing backlogs in construction projects, we are able to improve services to our veterans and save taxpayer dollars by taking advantage of today's reduced construction costs.

The increase above the national cemeteries budget request will create additional resources for the National Shrine Initiative in order to improve the appearance and condition of the cemeteries.

The increased funding for the Office of Inspector General will enable to careful oversight of programs and activities of the Department. The funding for education claims processors will keep personnel levels the same as fiscal year 2010, restoring 306 positions which the budget request proposed to eliminate.

### **Related Agencies**

The Committee recommendation for the four Related Agencies within the bill totals \$286 million. This is an increase of \$5.0 million above the fiscal year 2010 appropriation and an increase of almost \$2.0 million above the budget request. I know that one related agency is of particular concern to all Members – Arlington National Cemetery. Many Members have been disturbed by the findings of the Army Inspector General about serious mismanagement of the operation of this sacred site. I am encouraged by the personnel changes put in place by our former colleague, Army Secretary John McHugh. We have included an additional \$1.5 million in the bill to ensure that the Cemetery will have the resources needed to hire additional staff and implement the Total Cemetery Management System to automate its operations, and we have included report language proposed by Mr. Young which gives us better oversight of this program as it moves forward.

### **Conclusion**

This bill continues and expands the accomplishments of our Subcommittee over the past 3 ½ years and says to all who have served that, just as you have kept your promises to our country, we intend to keep our promises to you.

I want to thank our Subcommittee Members and Staff, Republicans and Democrats alike, for their hard work on this bill and for doing that work on a professional, bipartisan basis. Our vets and troops are the beneficiaries of that dedicated work.