



NEWS FOR VETERANS

CONGRESSMAN STEVE BUYER
REPRESENTING INDIANA'S 4TH CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

July 2009

Dear Fellow Veteran,

Congress has worked in a bipartisan effort over the last year in providing for Veterans. Since coming to Congress 16 years ago, I have fought for veterans' rights and benefits serving both on the Veterans Affairs Committee and the House Armed Services Committee. The opportunity to serve veterans, servicemembers, and their families, is a great honor and privilege.

This past year has seen notable legislative improvements for our veterans. On October 10, 2008, President Bush signed into public law my efforts in the Veterans' Benefits Improvement Act (P.L. 110-389 – see page 2), which expanded educational benefits utilization periods, established a Paralympics Team, increased VA home loan guarantees, and established a VA Office of Survivor's Assistance. In September 2008, President Bush signed into law an appropriations bill providing the VA more than \$94 billion in total funding for FY2009.

In December 2008, I wrote a letter to the President urging him to consider our veterans in the upcoming economic stimulus package, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. I urged him to include \$2.25 billion for several veteran programs, including \$1 billion to reauthorize the VA's small business loan program that expired in 1986. President Obama signed the final version of H.R.1 on February 17, 2009 authorizing only \$1.6 billion for the VA. Although the bill provided the much needed funding for VA construction, energy projects, and monument and memorial repairs that I requested, it lacked the funding I requested for the small business loan program.



Congressman Buyer greets Hoosier WWII veterans that participated in the Honor Flight Program, which flew them, free of cost, to visit the WWII memorial in Washington DC.

Since 2002, the VA's fiscal year budget authority has increased sixty-eight percent, averaging a nearly 10 percent increase per year. President Obama's administration has submitted a budget proposal for FY2010 of nearly \$109 billion, a 15% increase over the FY2009 VA budget. On July 10, 2009, H.R. 3082, Military Construction and VA Appropriations for FY2010, a bill that fully funded the President's request, passed the House with my support and was referred to the Senate for consideration. Additionally, at the local level, I am continuing to work with Governor Daniels to fund the renovation of the Veterans' Home in Lafayette, in addition to over \$1 million in VA construction grant money made available from the economic stimulus bill, matched with \$540,000 in funds from the State.

You will find a summary of key legislative updates enclosed within this newsletter that I feel will be of interest to you. Meeting the needs of veterans is my priority as Ranking Member of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee. I will continue to fight for the promotion and preservation of benefits for our veterans and their families. Please keep in touch with me through my offices in Indiana and Washington regarding benefits and access issues.

Sincerely,

Steve Buyer
Member of Congress



Veteran Benefits & Services

Veterans' Benefits Improvement Act: Among the major accomplishments of this past year is S. 3023, the Veterans' Benefits Improvement Act, which passed the House by a voice vote with my support. President Bush signed the bill on October 10, 2008, and it became Public Law 110-389. I worked closely with my colleagues on both the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees, in a bipartisan fashion, to shape this new law. P.L. 110-389 will begin a 20-year study of veterans who participate in the VA's vocational rehabilitation program. Also, spouses of those who die on active duty and spouses of veterans that are totally disabled will now have 20 years to use VA education benefits. It also expands several protections under the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act, and clarifies the VA's authority to purchase advertising as part of its outreach efforts.

One of the most exciting parts of this law authorizes a new program at VA which I championed to promote increased participation by disabled veterans in adaptive sports. The US Paralympics Team that competed in Beijing included thirteen disabled veterans, several of whom were wounded in the war on terror. I believe athletics can help heal the mind and body, and I am proud of our veterans who wore the uniform again, this time in athletic competition with Team U.S.A. at the Olympics. More recently, I worked with Congressman Filner, Chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, to offer an amendment to H.R. 3082, the Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations Act for FY2010, which would increase funding for the VA's US Paralympics Program by \$3.5 million. The amendment was agreed to by voice vote and H.R. 3082 was passed by the House on July 10, 2009 and referred to the Senate for consideration.



Steve Buyer meets with Melissa Stockwell, a US Army veteran of the Iraq War. Stockwell, who lost her left leg to an improvised explosive device in 2004, represented the U.S.A. in the 2008 Paralympics in Beijing, China, by competing in the swimming event.

In response to the current mortgage crisis, I shepherded the parts of P.L. 110-389 that will extend the temporary increases in the maximum home loans guaranteed by VA through 2011 and reduce equity requirements from the current 10 percent down to zero. This measure will also enhance and improve veterans' benefits and the system that administers them. Such provisions include measures to increase the accuracy and timeliness of benefits claims decisions and to enhance the VA's use of information technology. It will also look at VA disability compensation to ensure due consideration is afforded to veterans for their loss of earnings and quality of life, and it will allow substitution upon death of a claimant for purposes of acquiring accrued benefits. This provision will relieve survivors of deceased claimants the frustration and time consuming process of starting the entire claims process over from square one. Finally, P.L. 110-389 will create a VA Office of Survivor's Assistance to ensure surviving dependents have access to benefits and services.

Veteran Behavioral Health & Service Improvements

Veterans' Mental Health and Other Care Improvements Act (S.2162): This measure passed the House by a voice vote with my support and President Bush signed the bill on October 10, 2008, making it Public Law 110-387. This law improves treatment of substance use disorders and mental health disorders by directing the concurrent treatment of both disorders by properly trained VA healthcare professionals. P.L. 110-387 also directs the VA to establish a research program to study the connection of post traumatic stress disorder and substance abuse disorder.



Furthermore, P.L. 110-387 clarifies the authority for VA to provide marriage and family counseling as part of hospital care provided to veterans, and as part of services provided to family members of veterans. P.L. 110-387 sets a statutory limit to the deductible the VA can charge to veterans' mileage reimbursement at \$3 per one-way trip, requires the VA to cover the cost of emergency treatment for enrolled veterans until transferred to a VA or other federal facility, and exempts all hospice care provided by VA from co-payment requirements.

I am pleased that my legislation to require the VA to establish seven Consolidated Patient Accounting Centers (CPAC) within five years, to be modeled after the Mid-Atlantic CPAC, was included in P.L. 110-387. Although the law requires CPAC completion within five years, I personally requested the Secretary expedite their CPAC plan with the goal of completion within 3 years, which would save taxpayer dollars and provide better service to our veterans. The CPAC model allows the VA to establish consistent, nationally deployable business practices and improve customer service functions for our veterans. P.L. 110-387 also directed the VA to develop and implement a comprehensive policy on pain management and increased the authorization of appropriations for the homeless grant and per diem programs from \$130 million to \$150 million.

New Veteran Educational Benefits

The Post 9/11 GI Bill: In an effort to modernize the GI Bill, it was my aim to help craft a comprehensive solution that reflected the needs of the "Total Force" which includes our active duty, National Guard, and Reserve Components. More than 600,000 members of the Guard and Reserve have been called up since September 11, 2001, and more than 70,000 have served two or more tours of duty. Despite this increased service, old Selected Reserve GI Bill benefit programs had decreased significantly in buying power in comparison to the benefits of their active duty counterparts. Therefore, I am very pleased that the new GI Bill will increase benefits for members of the Guard and Reserves that are commensurate with their increased service to the nation.

The Post 9/11 GI Bill includes updated benefits for tuition, books, and housing, provides options for transfer of educational benefits, and introduces a new Yellow Ribbon Program which will enable students to attend the more expensive universities, provided the universities choose to participate in the program. The new GI Bill incorporates a graduated benefit scale providing 40% of the maximum educational benefit to veterans who serve at least 90 days on active duty, and 100% for those who serve at least 36 months aggregate time on active duty, thereby incorporating my proposal of three cumulative years of service. Although this graduated scale of benefits will benefit the members of our reserve components, there is still room for improvement in that regard. In July 2009, I asked representatives from the Indiana colleges and universities to participate in a GI Bill forum where we discussed the new GI bill and encouraged participation in the Yellow Ribbon Program. I encourage you to visit www.gibill.va.gov for more detailed information on the new Post 9/11 GI Bill. If you have additional questions not addressed by the website, you can contact a VA counselor at 1-888-GI-BILL-1 (1-888-442-4551).



Steve Buyer met with administration officials from several Indiana colleges and universities on July 1st to discuss the new Post 9-11 GI Bill benefits and encourage participation in the Yellow Ribbon Program.



Steve Buyer Noble Warrior Initiatives

With the beginning of the 111th Congress that started this past January, I have introduced several new pieces of legislation regarding veteran benefits with the announcement of my Noble Warrior Initiatives:

- ***The Veterans' Small Business Promotion Act of 2009 (H.R. 294):*** This bill would put stimulus funding where it would help both veterans and the economy the most. It would renew VA authority to guarantee loans of up to \$500,000 for small businesses owned and operated by veterans. The VA would be authorized up to \$1 billion in loan guarantees for each fiscal year. Small businesses are the backbone of our economy and disabled veterans own and operate a significant percentage of small business firms.
- ***The More Jobs for Veterans Act of 2009 (H.R. 295):*** This bill would increase funding for the Department of Labor Veteran Work Investment Program (VWIP) by \$20 million per year. The VWIP helps veterans acquire employment skills relevant to today's job market.
- ***The Veteran Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Subsistence Allowance Improvement Act of 2009 (H.R. 297):*** This bill would increase the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment monthly living allowance rate from \$520 to \$1,200 per month.
- ***The Homeless Women Veteran and Homeless Veterans with Children Reintegration Grant Program Act (H.R. 293):*** This bill, originally introduced as H.R. 293, would authorize appropriations of \$10 million annually to provide reintegration services for homeless women veterans and homeless veterans with children. I was able to offer this program as an amendment to Congressman John Boozman's Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program Reauthorization Act of 2009 (H.R. 1171), which passed the House on March 31, 2009 and has been received in the Senate.
- ***The Armed Forces Disability Retirement Enhancement Act (H.R. 296):*** This bill would simplify military disability retirement. This bill would ensure that those found unable to serve would automatically receive military retirement benefits based on rank and years of service. This provision would also end the offset between military retirement pay and VA disability compensation. Medical retirees would also automatically receive health and dental coverage. Currently, such eligibility hinges on the findings of a military physical evaluation board; injured servicemembers should not have to endure the added worry as to whether physical evaluation boards will grant such benefits.
- ***The Disabled Veterans Home Improvement and Structural Alteration Grant Increase Act (H.R. 1293):*** This bill would increase the authorized amount of the HISA grant that VA provides as part of home health services. It is an important benefit that is available to veterans with service-connected and non-service-connected disabilities who require home adaptations to continue in-home medical care for their disability.



Steve Buyer met with members of the Gold Star Wives in May 2009 after the announcement of his Surviving Spouses Benefit Improvement Act (H.R.2243), which would increase Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) payments by 12% and eliminate the Survivor Benefit Plan-DIC offset.



Steve Buyer Staff Introductions

As you know, Veterans play an incredibly important role in the civilian workforce of our country. The values, training, work ethic, and the perspective of our veterans add immeasurable value to the workplaces across our country. I think it is important for our civilian communities to employ our nations' veterans as a valuable contributing member of their organizations - veterans certainly have much to offer.

Over the past sixteen years, I have had the pleasure of employing some thirty veterans on my staff. I would like to introduce two veterans that currently work on my team in Indiana. Joe Oyler and Eric Woolf are both U.S. Army veterans who have served our country with honor. They work hard to handle all constituent concerns regarding veteran and military issues, focusing especially on personal matters, or "casework." Together, Eric and Joe have successfully secured over \$216,000 in veteran and military benefits since January 2009, for Hoosiers who may have otherwise been lost in the bureaucratic shuffle.

Joe L. Oyler, CSM (Ret.), USA



CSM (Ret.) Joe Oyler was born and raised in Burlington, Indiana. He retired from the U.S. Army Reserve in 1995 after serving as the Command Sergeant Major and Chief Operations Sergeant for the 21st Theater Army Area Command based out of Indianapolis, IN. During Joe's 31 years in the Army Reserve, one of his many notable accomplishments included the development of the Yearly Training Program, which was recognized by the Commanding General as the best training program out of approximately 80 units in the 123d U.S. Army Reserve Command. Joe is a combat veteran, serving during Operation Desert Storm



from December, 1990 to February, 1992 as the Chief Operations Sergeant where he was responsible for all logistical support of the Allied Forces during the Gulf War. Joe's decorations include the Legion of Merit, a Meritorious Service Medal, and the Expert Infantryman Badge.

Joe joined my staff in 2003, and resides in Burlington, IN, where he lives with his wife, Judith. Joe has two children, Leanne and Stanley, and four grandchildren.

Eric J. Woolf



Eric Woolf was raised in Tipton, Indiana and is a 2003 graduate of West Point. He served five years in the U.S. Army, separating in 2008 as a Captain. Eric served most recently as an Observer-Controller/Trainer at Camp Atterbury where he was responsible for training National Guard and Reserve companies, platoons, and squads, and served as the subject matter expert on Infantry doctrine and tactics. Eric is also a combat veteran, serving in Iraq for twelve months in 2005 during



Operation Iraqi Freedom. As a Platoon Leader and later the Troop Executive Officer, Eric conducted over 250 combat patrols and his unit captured over 50 insurgents in Baghdad. Eric's decorations include the Bronze Star, a Meritorious Service Medal, and the Combat Infantryman Badge. Eric joined my staff in 2008, and resides in Monticello, IN, where his lives with his chocolate lab, Coffee.



Veteran Survey

I appreciate hearing from you and would like your feedback. Please feel free to complete the below survey and mail it back to my Washington DC office (see address below).

1) What do you believe the Department of Veterans' Affairs needs to improve on, if anything?

2) Our country's national debt is approximately \$11.5 trillion dollars and the federal government is on course to have a \$1.8 trillion dollar deficit for the FY2010 federal budget. Please provide suggestions on federal government programs that you believe we could cut or reduce spending.

3) Please provide what you believe are the most important issues facing our country today.

4) Please share what you believe was the best part of serving your country in the U.S. military.

For more information or assistance, please contact me at any of my offices or through my website at www.stevebuyer.house.gov:

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