



UNITED STATES SENATOR BERNIE SANDERS

Veterans Update 2008



Dear Vermont Veteran:

As many of you know, the reason that I wanted to join the United States Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee is that I have long believed that veterans were not getting a fair shake from our government. In essence, promises were made to them, but were not kept. That's wrong. When members of the Armed Forces complete their service and return home, they should not have to wage another war to receive the benefits they have earned and deserve.

I am happy to tell you that this past year, we have finally begun to make some real progress in addressing the serious and longstanding needs of the men and women who have worn our nation's uniform. Working with the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion, the Disabled American Veterans, the Vietnam Veterans of America, AMVETS, Paralyzed Veterans of America and other service organizations, the Veterans' Affairs Committee recommended and Congress passed the largest increase in funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs in the 77 year history of that agency.

This \$88 billion in funding is a \$3.7 billion increase over the president's budget request and, for the first time, matches what veterans service organizations requested for this fiscal year. With the passage of this landmark legislation, Congress has begun to acknowledge the debt our nation owes to the brave men and women who answered our country's call and is making a down payment to reverse the years of neglect and inadequate funding of the VA.

While we have made some progress, the need remains great and we must continue moving forward. For instance, we must address the very serious problems facing those who have and will return from Iraq and Afghanistan. In Iraq alone, more than 29,000 service members have been wounded and tens of thousands more will be coming home with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). Keeping faith with these veterans and their families will require a major commitment from the VA, Congress, and the American people. The VA now has a first installment of the money they need to take care of these veterans, but we must ensure that every veteran gets the help that he or she needs upon returning home.

Let me briefly mention to you some of the important accomplishments included in the landmark VA funding bill passed by the Congress.

At a time when veterans across the country are waiting far too long to get their claims processed, this legislation provides \$124 million to hire an additional 1,800 VA claims processors to end this unacceptable backlog. Veterans deserve a prompt response to their claim requests and, hopefully, this allocation of funds will do just that and allow the Department of Veterans Affairs to eliminate the backlog of more than 400,000 claims.

With many of our soldiers coming home with severe injuries, \$480 million will be available for medical and prosthetic research. Some good progress has been made in this area in recent years, but more needs to be done. We must stay focused on our goal of enabling these heroes and heroines to live as normal and productive a life as possible.

I am also happy to inform you that, at long last, Congress has taken a first step toward changing the mileage reimbursement rate for veterans traveling to and from their health care facilities. This is an issue that many Vermont veterans have talked to me about and I'm glad the Congress was finally able to take action. At a time when gas is well over \$3.00 per gallon, Congress has provided the VA with enough money to raise the reimbursement rate to 28.5 cents a mile, a significant increase over the previous 11 cents per mile rate. I am pleased to report that, as of February 1, 2008, the VA will reimburse veterans at this increased rate. *Please see the article inside for details about this historic increase in veterans funding.*

Let me conclude by mentioning that if you are having problems with the VA, have questions about your benefits, or are in need of any other kind of assistance, please contact my Vermont office at 1-800-339-9834. I have an excellent staff that is there to assist you. In addition, you can stay up-to-date on developments on veterans' issues in Washington and Vermont by visiting my Website www.sanders.senate.gov/issues/veterans.cfm, where you can also sign up to receive *The Bernie Buzz*, my monthly email, which will keep you updated on my work in Washington.

I hope you find the information in this newsletter informative. Thank you very much for your service to our country.

Sincerely,

Bernard Sanders
United States Senator

A Victory For Veterans – Congress Passes Landmark Spending Bill *What This Means For You*

As the brief summary in the cover letter noted, Congress has approved the largest increase in funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs in its 77 year history, providing a total of \$88 billion for VA programs and benefits. This level of funding exceeded the president's request by \$3.7 billion or four percent. It is important to note that President Bush initially threatened to veto this bill because it was an "excessive level of spending."



report states that as many as 20 percent of U.S. troops coming home from war show signs that they may have had a mild traumatic brain injury. This funding will provide the VA with the tools necessary to screen these service members and provide treatment, counseling and other health services to assist them with the transition from battlefield to home.

Everyone knows that in Vermont and across this country we have a large number of veterans waiting to have their claims adjudicated. In fact, there are more than 400,000 claims waiting to be processed at the VA. In the year 2008, with all the modern technology available, this type of backlog is unacceptable. The funding provided in this bill will enable the Department of Veterans Affairs to hire an additional 1,800 claims processors to chip away at this huge caseload.

While we are providing the highest quality health care possible for our new veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, we must also make certain that the VA is capable of continuing to provide excellent care for our older veterans. We cannot take from one group of deserving veterans to give to another. That is why it is important that this veterans' bill appropriates \$29.1 billion for veterans' medical services, \$3.1 billion or 12 percent above the current level. Increases in this area mean that the VA can hire more physicians, nurses, and other health care professionals to keep pace with the growing demand for services.

But now that this legislation has been signed into law, the question is how will it be used to help our veterans? Let me give you a few examples.

The resources included in this bill will go toward the critical work of researching and treating what have become the signature injuries of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan: Traumatic Brain Injury and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, the number of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans who experienced PTSD increased by 70 percent – or by 20,000 cases – during the last fiscal year. Shockingly, a new Army

The bill also provides \$4.1 billion for the operation and maintenance of veterans' hospitals and other medical facilities, \$530 million or 15 percent more than the current level. This means that the VA will have the money to make sure that our VA facilities are in good condition and have the equipment they need to deliver quality health care services.

With so many of our troops returning from Iraq and Afghanistan in need of prosthetics and with existing veterans needing upgrades to devices they already have, I am happy to report that this legislation contains \$480 million for medical and prosthetic research, \$69 million more than the administration's request. The bill appropriates \$41.2 billion in mandatory spending for veterans' service-connected compensation benefits and pensions. This will fund service-connected compensation benefits for approximately 3.2 million beneficiaries, and will provide pension payments for another 513,034 veterans with disabilities not connected to service and to their beneficiaries.

Other important programs that will be funded are: \$10 million for Gulf War Illnesses research; \$3 million to continue and expand the Vermont National Guard Outreach Program; and \$3 million to establish a National Outreach program that is modeled after the program we have in Vermont. See related story in this newsletter for more details about this program.

In addition to securing this much needed funding for these invaluable programs and services, the bill also rejects some of the administration's proposed attacks on our veterans – such as an increase in fees on prescription drug co-payments and imposing an annual enrollment fee.



Keeping Our Promise To Persian Gulf War Veterans

As the country recommits itself to providing medical care to servicemen and women returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, we cannot abandon the 175,000 veterans of the first Gulf War who still suffer from chronic multi-symptom illnesses known as Gulf War Illness. Throughout the last 15 years I have worked to get justice for our Gulf War veterans who returned home with a host of unexplained symptoms and ailments including widespread pain, cognitive impairment, and persistent fatigue. I am happy to report that this year I was able to secure \$10 million in research money so that our best and brightest scientists can work to find treatments for these heroes. After years of denial and resistance from the Department of Defense and the VA, we are finally beginning to see some promising government-funded research that could help these veterans. The effort to secure these resources was supported by the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America, Vietnam Veterans of America, AMVETS, Veterans of Modern Warfare, and the National Vietnam and Gulf War Veterans Coalition.

Helping Our Iraq And Afghanistan Veterans Transition From Battlefield To Home

It is a lot harder than people think for a soldier to return from war and resume a normal family or work life. This is especially true with the war in Iraq where record numbers of soldiers are coming home with PTSD or TBI. In that regard, it is absolutely essential that we do all that we can for the many Vermont service members who have recently served in Iraq and Afghanistan to make sure that they and their families have access to all the benefits that will help them live healthy and productive lives. Through my position on the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs and working with Senator Leahy, I was able to secure \$3 million to continue a unique program being run by the Vermont National Guard in conjunction with the VA at White River Junction.

This program, which began last year, employs trained Vermont veterans to reach out directly to returning service members and their families to ensure that they are receiving the help that they may need. That may mean assistance with general health problems; mental health, marriage, and/or financial counseling; services for children; and substance abuse awareness and treatment. Service members and their families, especially those from the National Guard and Reserves, often are not aware of the benefits available to them or do not know how to access them. This program, through strong outreach efforts, educates and connects our men and women in uniform directly to that help.

This outreach effort is especially important for service members who live in rural areas. The \$3 million in funding will be used to hire more outreach workers, provide expanded mental health services to treat Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and other health issues, and screen service members for possible Traumatic Brain Injuries that have gone undetected. Returning service members and their families who have questions or who are in need of assistance should call the 24/7 HELPLINE at (888) 607-8773.



Helpful Phone Numbers

White River Junction VA Medical Center

Toll-Free: (866) OUR-VETS or 802-295-9363
<http://www.whiteriver.va.gov/>

State of Vermont, Office of Veterans Affairs

(802) 828-3379
<http://www.va.state.vt.us/>

VT National Guard Family and Service Member Assistance Program

Toll-Free: 1-888-607-8773 (available 24/7)
<http://www.vtguard.com/famread/index.htm>

Transitions: Dr. James B. Peake To Head Department Of Veterans Affairs – White River Junction VA Director Gary Degasta Retires Following Four Decades Of Distinguished Service

As a member of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I had the opportunity to meet with Dr. James B. Peake, the president's nominee to be the new Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs, replacing outgoing Secretary Jim Nicholson. My message to Dr. Peake was simple: the VA must do a better job taking care of our soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan while maintaining high quality service to our existing veterans. In addition, we discussed my desire to reverse the 2003 VA policy that bars millions of so-called Category 8 veterans from enrolling in the VA. I also strongly expressed that we need to increase the availability of and access to health care for veterans in rural states like Vermont.

On December 14, 2007, the United States Senate voted to confirm Dr. Peake as Secretary. Although Dr. Peake will likely only be in his job for one year due to the change in administrations, I look forward to working with him to make as many changes as we can to improve the functioning of the VA. Congress has substantially increased funding for the VA and it is imperative that Secretary

Peake make certain that all of that new funding is spent wisely and cost-effectively, and targeted toward the most pressing needs of our veterans.

THANK YOU GARY DEGASTA

As many of you may know, Gary DeGasta, the long-time Director of the White River Junction VA Medical Center, recently retired after 40 years of distinguished service to Vermont veterans. I very much enjoyed the opportunity of working with Gary as Vermont's Congressman and now as Senator. One of Gary's strengths was that he was able to produce results for our veterans in the midst of what is sometimes a large and unwieldy VA bureaucracy. He also understood that while it is crucial to have the best possible health care services for our veterans, they are of little value if veterans do not know about them or

cannot access them. In that regard, the VA at White River Junction and my office worked successfully on a major outreach effort which helped bring, over a period of years, thousands of Vermont veterans into the VA system. Throughout



his tenure, Gary has played a great role in protecting the interests of Vermont veterans and he will be sorely missed. As of this writing, Gary's replacement has not yet been chosen.

Reimbursements Finally Making Cents

As Vermont veterans know all too well, it is often necessary to travel great distances by car to obtain medical services at VA facilities. Too many veterans living in rural areas are not getting the care they need because they cannot afford to get to a VA facility. While the VA offers a mileage reimbursement, we all know that it does not cover the true cost of commuting. The travel benefit - which is provided almost exclusively to veterans with a disability of 20 percent or greater - had not changed from 11 cents per mile for the past 30 years. This year I worked with my colleagues on the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee to provide the VA with \$125 million to increase the travel reimbursement rate. I wrote to VA Secretary Peake urging him to quickly implement this change. I am happy to report that on January 31, 2008, Secretary Peake announced that the VA will change the reimbursement rate to 28.5 cents per mile, effective February 1, 2008. During the course of this year, I will be working to raise that rate even higher and remove the deductible entirely. Veterans should receive the same reimbursement rate that federal employees do, which is currently 48.5 cents per mile.



One Step Closer To Opening The Door To Quality Health Care For All Veterans

As you know, in January of 2003 the Department of Veterans Affairs announced that it would no longer allow Category 8 veterans to enroll into the VA health care system. President Bush justified this move on the grounds that these were "higher income" veterans. The truth, however, is that these veterans can make as little as \$27,000 a year. This policy has kept hundreds of Vermont veterans out of the VA system, and the VA itself estimates that by the end of this year more than 1.5 million Category 8 veterans will have been denied enrollment in the VA health-care system nationwide. To correct this inequity, I introduced legislation that would repeal this harmful VA policy and allow these men and women who have served our country to receive health care benefits. A version of this legislation was passed by the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, but it is being blocked from Senate floor action by some of my Senate colleagues and the Bush administration. This year, I will be working hard to get this legislation signed into law and provide the VA with the funding it needs to deliver health care to these veterans. It is just plain wrong for our government to slam the door on the brave men and women who put their lives on the line defending our country.



Bernie will send you an email update providing you with a fresh perspective on events as only he can. Go to sanders.senate.gov to sign up.