

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

Subcommittee 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 during markup of the fiscal year 2011 Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act:

I want to welcome everyone to the Subcommittee's mark up of the fiscal year 2011 Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations bill.

This bill continues our Subcommittee's commitment to provide America's servicemen and women with the operational facilities required to do their jobs and the facilities to improve the quality of life for them and their families. It also provides our veterans with quality health care, educational benefits, and other services that support their readjustment into civilian life. This bill honors in a meaningful way the service and sacrifices of our troops, our veterans and their families.

This bill builds on the unprecedented new commitments we have made to our servicemen and women and veterans since 2007. I want to salute the Subcommittee Members on a bipartisan basis for putting the interests of our troops and vets above partisanship. Together, we have been able to accomplish a great deal over the past 3 years. Even prior to this markup, we have been able to:

- Provide last year, for the first time in history, advance appropriations for the VA health accounts to make sure that veterans can count on reliable and timely funding for their health care and that tax dollars will be used efficiently;
- Increase VA discretionary funding by \$23 billion or 60 percent;
- Add 8,300 claims processors to handle the million claims the VA now receives annually;
- Fund a historic new GI Bill, which will provide \$63 billion over a ten-year period for tuition assistance, educational materials, and housing assistance for our newest generation of veterans;
- Re-open Priority 8 enrollment for veterans with modest incomes for the first time since 2003;
- Add \$250 million per year for a rural health initiative to better serve veterans who have had trouble accessing services; and
- More than double funding provided for the Homeless Grant and Per Diem Program to \$150 million.

For Military Construction:

- According to Department of Defense historical data, in the past three years we have invested more in military construction than in any comparable period since 1948. With this historical investment, this

Subcommittee has initiated key quality of life programs for our military personnel and their families, including:

- More than \$3 billion for new military hospitals, including much-needed new hospitals at Fort Benning, Fort Riley, Fort Hood, Fort Bliss, Camp Lejeune, and Camp Pendleton;
- Over \$1 billion for child development centers serving over 20,000 military dependents;
- An additional \$900 million to accelerate new barracks for our soldiers, marines, sailors, and airmen;
- \$200 million to address unfunded requirements for the Guard and Reserve; and
- Continued strong support for the family housing privatization program, which has produced \$27 billion in high-quality new family housing.

I'm convinced that we have been able to reach these important milestones for our servicemen and women and veterans because our subcommittee has continued its legacy of bipartisanship. That is due in no small part to our ranking Member, Mr. Wamp, whose presence we will sorely miss in the years ahead. Mr. Wamp, I salute you for your genuine and committed leadership for our troops and veterans. It has been a privilege to partner with you in our Subcommittee's work.

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 lifelong dedication to our troops and our veterans and his leadership in putting the interests of our troops and veterans above partisanship, whether he was in the minority or majority.

I want to express a special thanks to Chairman Dave Obey, given this will be his last markup in our Subcommittee. 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 was made possible by his leadership. While others have received the credit, it was Mr. Obey who, in partnership with Speaker Pelosi and America's veterans, 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. I believe what Mr. Obey has done for veterans will be one of the greatest of his many, many congressional accomplishments. If I could be so bold as to quote Archie the Cockroach, "Chairman Obey, you have been a good and faithful servant of all those who have served our nation in uniform and their families, and for that, God bless you."

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. The bill designates this funding as an emergency.

Although the bill total is at 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.

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, \$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 \$3.3 billion for Information Technology Systems, which is \$50 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 \$50 million reduction in IT has been used to increase funding for minor construction and national cemeteries.

- 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.

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 McHugh. We I 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.

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.