



Statement of Senator Dianne Feinstein on
FY2006 Veterans Affairs Department Budget
March 15, 2005

Washington, DC – The Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction and Veterans Affairs today convened a hearing on the Department of Veterans Affairs Budget Overview. Following is the statement of subcommittee ranking member U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.):

“Madam Chairman, thank you for holding this hearing today, and allow me to join you in welcoming Secretary Nicholson and the Department of Veterans Affairs to this subcommittee. I look forward to this new chapter in the history of our subcommittee with excitement at the challenges ahead and deep respect for veterans we will be representing.

I am also mindful of the history of strong bipartisan support for veterans programs that was a hallmark of the former VA-HUD subcommittee, and I look forward to working with you, Madam Chairman, to continue that tradition. As representatives of two of the three states with the largest population of veterans, you and I have a unique appreciation of both the challenges and the opportunities before us.

That said, I am very disappointed in the President’s FY 2006 budget request for the Department of Veterans Affairs. This budget assumes savings of over \$1 billion by doubling prescription drug co-payments and imposing a \$250 enrollment fee on middle income veterans, many of whom are struggling to make ends meet as it is on incomes as low as \$26,000 a year. More than 200,000 veterans would be adversely affected by these proposals. These are unrealistic assumptions -- Congress has rejected them in the past, and I hope we will continue to reject them.

We are a nation at war. The military has discharged more than 244,000 veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan, and the VA has already treated nearly 49,000 of those returning troops. Yet this budget turns a blind eye to the increasing demands on the VA health care system caused by the influx of new veterans as well as the aging population of veterans from earlier wars. Instead of reaching out to veterans, this budget proposes to shut more veterans out of the health care system, by charging enrollment fees, by hiking co-pays on prescription drug benefits, and by limiting long term nursing home care.

This is not how we should be treating America’s veterans. I know that money is tight, but the Administration should not try to balance the books by forcing veterans to shoulder a greater share of the burden of health care costs.

Mr. Secretary, these are tough issues, but they must be addressed. My goal as a member of this subcommittee is to do everything in my power to ensure that we keep the promises we made to our veterans, and in so doing, make the highest and best use of taxpayer dollars. I look forward to your testimony, and I look forward to working with you as a fellow advocate for our nation's veterans."

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