



Congressional Accomplishments for Veterans in The 110th Congress: *A Record of Success*

As the 110th Congress comes to a close, Congress can be proud of the work it has done to fulfill our government's obligations to veterans. Congressionally-passed legislation included record-breaking funding to veterans' programs, sweeping increases to college-aid for troops, veterans and families, and unprecedented access to health care for returning servicemembers.

Congressional Accomplishments for Veterans

Record-Breaking Funding for Veterans: In years past, the Department of Veterans Affairs has been plagued by underfunding. In 2007, the first year under Democratic leadership, Congress appropriated the biggest increase to veterans' programs in the history of the Department. Democratic leaders advocated for another increase in this year's VA budget, arguing that veterans care and benefits must be funded for what it is: a cost of war.

In 2008 Congress went even further, providing a \$4.5 billion increase beyond last year's, \$2.8 billion above the President's proposed budget.

A 21st Century GI Bill: While today's post-9/11 servicemembers are wartime troops, they received educational benefits from a program designed for peacetime. In recognition the wartime service of our troops and veterans, Congress passed the 21st Century GI Bill, of which provided the largest boost to veterans' higher educational benefits since World War II.

Wounded Warriors Legislation: As Walter Reed pushed a number of veterans' issues into the spotlight, the Committees on Armed Services and Veterans' Affairs collaborated in an unprecedented manner, holding a joint hearing and drafting what became the "Wounded Warrior" legislation. Recognizing that care for injured troops and veterans is a cost of war, these provisions were included in last year's National Defense Authorization Act, now Public Law 110-181.

The Wounded Warrior provisions included the following improvements to veterans care: giving returning troops five years of unfettered eligibility for VA health care, providing traumatically brain injured veterans with individual caseworkers, and expanding veterans outreach to include veterans of the Guard and Reserve.

Strengthening Veterans' Mental Health Care: The "Justin Bailey Bill," an omnibus veterans' mental health bill recently passed by Congress, improved care by setting a standard level of

care for substance use disorder at VA facilities, improving care for veterans with multiple disorders, enabling VA to provide mental health services to both veterans and their family members, and mandating a review of VA's residential mental health facilities. This bill paid tribute to Justin Bailey, a young Iraq war veteran lost to PTSD and substance abuse.

Protecting Veterans' Housing: Veterans who defended our country abroad should not have to be left out in the cold of a national housing crisis. Appropriately, the Housing and Economic Recovery Act included several housing provisions for servicemembers and veterans, including: tripling the time a lender must wait before starting foreclosure on returning troops (from three to nine-months) and providing them with one year of mortgage interest rate-relief, a stimulus-level increase to the VA home loan guarantee, and an increase in benefits paid to veterans with certain disabilities. Congress also passed legislation to enhance home loan options for veterans and extend



VA's hybrid adjustable-rate mortgage program.

Preventing Veteran Suicide: Named for a young veteran who served our country honorably only to be lost to suicide, the Joshua Omvig Suicide Prevention Act mandated a national veterans' suicide prevention plan, and requires that every VA medical facility have a suicide prevention counselor. VA has since established a 24-hour suicide hotline, which has connected with tens of thousands of veterans, and resulted in over a thousand successful rescues.

Improving Veterans Disability Compensation: To protect the rate of compensation for disabled veterans and their family members from rising inflation, Congress passed legislation in 2007 and 2008, increasing disability and survivor compensation to match the rising cost of living. In addition, legislation was enacted to simplify claims notices for veterans, and hire thousands of claims processors to reduce the veterans' benefits backlog.

Footnotes:

1. Disabled American Veterans, "News Release: VA Budget Earns High Praise," www.dav.org/news/documents/news_20071106b.pdf
2. Army Times, "New GI Bill Answers," http://www.armytimes.com/news/2008/07/military_gibillexplained_072008w/
3. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, "Akaka Applauds Enactment of Defense Bill Provisions for Wounded Warriors," http://www.veterans.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?pageid=12&release_id=11517
4. Congressional Research Services, "'Wounded Warrior' and Veterans Provisions in the FY2008 National Defense Authorization Act," <http://www.congress.gov/erp/rl/pdf/RL34371.pdf>
5. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, "Congress Passes Sweeping Veterans' Mental Health Legislation," http://veterans.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?pageid=12&release_id=11807
6. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, "VA Failing to Inform Guard and Reservists Returning from Iraq/Afghanistan of Potential Benefits, New IG Report Shows," http://veterans.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?pageid=12&release_id=11760
7. Congressional Research Services, "Suicide Prevention Among Veterans," <http://www.congress.gov/erp/rl/pdf/RL34471.pdf>
8. Congressional Research Services, "'Wounded Warrior' and Veterans Provisions in the FY2008 National Defense Authorization Act," <http://www.congress.gov/erp/rl/pdf/RL34371.pdf>

The Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

The Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs held 57 hearings, including 10 joint hearings with the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, and one joint hearing with the Armed Services Committee. SVAC has heard from over 300 witnesses, held 11 business meetings, and seven field hearings. Under Democratic leadership, the Committee has discharged more than twice as much legislation in 110th Congress as was passed under the GOP-controlled 109th Congress.

About the Committee Chairman

Senator Daniel K. Akaka (D-HI) is the Chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs. A veteran of World War II, Akaka has served on the Committee since starting his Senate career in 1990. He brings his understanding as a fellow veteran, his training as an educator, and his collaborative Hawaiian-style to bring people together and improve care and benefits for the veterans of America and their families.

Congressional Accomplishments for Veterans: Summary

Since the majority shifted to Democratic control in January 2007, Congress has:

- ★ Provided the biggest funding increase in the history of the Department of Veterans Affairs ¹
- ★ Given the largest boost to veterans' higher educational aid since World War II to post- 9/11 veterans through the 21st Century GI Bill ²
- ★ Tore down limitations to health care for veterans by widening the period that returning troops can receive unfettered VA health care ³
- ★ Passed sweeping legislation focused on improving care for traumatic brain injuries ⁴ and mental health issues ⁵
- ★ Expanded outreach to veterans of the Guard and Reserve, as they continue their larger role in the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan ⁶
- ★ Strengthened suicide prevention for veterans throughout VA ⁷
- ★ Worked to reduce red tape in the disability evaluation process through a single evaluation pilot project for injured servicemembers ⁸

