

EDITOR'S NOTE: Sen. Cardin writes periodic columns for Maryland publications. The following column on veterans' benefits may be of interest to your readers. Please contact Susan Sullam at susan_sullam@cardin.senate.gov if you have any questions.

PRECEDDE: Senator Cardin is a member of five committees: Foreign Relations, Judiciary, Environment and Public Works, Budget and Small Business. His web site is: cardin.senate.gov

WE NEED TO DO MORE FOR OUR VETERANS

By U.S. Senator Benjamin L. Cardin

As we pay homage to our nation's fallen heroes this Memorial Day, we also turn our attention to those brave veterans who are still with us. Today, we are a nation of 25 million veterans, and the best way we can honor their sacrifice and commitment is to provide them with the benefits and services they deserve.

Last year, the nation was shocked to learn how our injured soldiers were mistreated at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. In response, Congress passed the largest funding increase in history for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). As a member of the Senate Budget Committee, I worked to ensure that the budget resolution passed by the Senate for FY 2009 continues that high level of commitment. It provides more than \$48 billion for discretionary veterans programs, including medical care -- \$3 billion more than was requested in the President's budget.

Congress is working to address more of their needs by eliminating bureaucratic hurdles, expanding health care, improving educational benefits, and providing financial help during this economic downturn.

In addition to rejecting the President's proposal for new TRICARE enrollment fees and deductibles for military retirees under age 65, the budget resolution also helps to improve coordination of care by requiring the Department of Defense and the VA to develop an interoperable electronic personal health information system, a system that will be important in managing the care of veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

Congress also has been able to help veterans weather the recent housing crisis and economic downturn. In February, we made sure that our economic stimulus package was expanded to include checks for 250,000 disabled veterans. In April, we passed a housing package that included increased limits on the VA Home Loan program and authorization for the VA to provide increased housing grants to disabled veterans.

I also am pleased that the Senate recently passed the *Veterans Benefits Enhancement Act*, S. 1315, which will improve benefits and services for all veterans. Among its many provisions it would establish a new program of insurance for service-connected veterans, expand eligibility for retroactive benefits from traumatic injury protection coverage, and

increase the maximum amount of Veterans Mortgage Life insurance that a service-connected disabled veteran may purchase.

Congress must also ensure that GI educational benefits meet the needs of this generation of veterans. To ensure today's veterans receive educational benefits similar to their fathers and grandfathers after World War II, I have co-sponsored the ***Post 9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act***, S. 22. Its most important provision would grant the full cost of in-state tuition plus a monthly stipend for living expenses for members of the Armed Services who have served on active duty since 9/11.

Many of our veterans suffer from wounds that cannot be seen. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is just as devastating as any physical injury. In recognition of the increasing need for mental health services, VA Secretary James Peake recently announced an additional \$2 million for the National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Unfortunately, in Western Maryland, many veterans found bureaucratic roadblocks to their continued mental health treatment. I was able to ensure that the VA would allow Maryland veterans located in the Cumberland area, many suffering from PTSD, to continue their mental health care from a provider with whom many had already established a strong relationship.

These steps are an important beginning, but we have much more work to do. Our nation's soldiers, sailors and airmen have made enormous sacrifices for our freedom. Now it's our turn to provide them with the assistance and support they need and deserve.

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