

Between 2003 and 2006, funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) was \$8 billion below the Independent Budget, an estimate of the VA's funding needs produced each year by a group of respected veterans' service organizations. Our country was engaged in two wars, but the VA was woefully unprepared to care for the tens of thousands of new veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. Instead of building capacity and investing in research to provide the best care for veterans suffering from new types of injuries, the VA was forced to make ends meet by proposing new user fees and increased co-pays. By 2006, years of chronic underfunding had strained the VA to its breaking point.

Fortunately, over the past three and a half years, the VA has gotten back on sound footing. Since January 2007, Congress has provided an unprecedented 70 percent increase in funding for veterans' health care and benefits – enough funding for over 10,000 new claims processors to reduce VA case backlogs, over 3,300 new doctors and 14,000 new nurses, 145 new community-based veterans' outpatient clinics, and nearly 100 new veterans centers. For the first time ever, we took the additional step of securing "advance appropriations" for VA health care funding, protecting it from the uncertainties of the annual budget process and providing our local VA hospitals and clinics with a stable and reliable funding stream.

These positive trends have been maintained in the VA funding bill for fiscal year (FY) 2011, which was approved by the House on July 28 by an overwhelming bipartisan vote of 411 to 6. In an effort to bolster the VA workforce and reduce the VA's claims backlog, the FY 2011 bill included \$11.2 billion to hire an additional 4,000 veterans' claims processors. The bill also would increase funding for mental health services, medical facilities, and medical and prosthetic research. In addition, we were able to provide funding for the construction of much-needed facilities for the North Carolina National Guard. Finally, in response to a recent study conducted by the Army's Inspector General, the bill would provide \$3.96 million to address deficiencies identified at Arlington National Cemetery.

In addition to increasing funding for core veterans programs, Congress also has worked to provide new or expanded benefits to meet the needs of a new generation of veterans and their families. Perhaps the greatest achievement in this area has been the "Post-9/11 G.I. Bill," which covers the cost of a college education at a public university and includes a housing and textbook allowance for returning veterans. In the past year alone, the VA has issued Post-9/11 G.I. Bill benefits to more than 275,000 individuals and delivered \$2.1 billion in education benefits to veteran students. Congress has also made sure that our National Guard and Reserve veterans have access to these and other new benefit programs, in recognition of their critical contributions to our nation's combat missions over the past decade. To cite just one example, the 2009 National Defense Authorization Act allows National Guard and Reserve

members to count their overseas deployments toward an earlier retirement date.

As a member of the Congressional Invisible Wounds Caucus, I am also pleased with the actions that Congress has taken to address the urgent mental health needs of America's veterans. The 2008 National Defense Authorization Act increased VA health care eligibility for returning Iraq and Afghanistan veterans from three to five years and improved treatment benefits for veterans suffering from traumatic brain injury. The Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010, which was signed into law in May, addresses the troubling reality of post-traumatic stress and incidents of suicide among the veteran population by commissioning a much-needed study on veterans' suicide and instructing the VA to provide counseling referrals for servicemembers who are not otherwise eligible for readjustment counseling. In an effort to provide immediate relief to combat veterans, the VA has also simplified the process for a veteran to claim service connection for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) by lowering the burden of proof.

Additionally, Congress has responded to President Obama's call to end veteran homelessness in five years. The Caregiver Act of 2010 gives the VA the authority to expand the number of places where homeless veterans may receive supportive services, and I am also pleased to report that the housing funding committee on which I sit provided additional housing vouchers for 10,000 veterans in its FY 2011 appropriations bill. For veterans struggling without a roof over their heads, these small changes in the law will make a big difference.

While I am very proud of these positive actions, I am also keenly aware that much work remains to be done to ensure that our nation's commitment to its veterans is commensurate to their service. For starters, many veterans are unaware of the new benefits available to them, and we can use your help in spreading the word. But Congress also has more work to do, including finding a permanent solution to unresolved issues such as concurrent receipt and survivors' benefits.

I also stand ready to assist you with any issues you may be having with the VA or other federal agencies. If you need help, please contact one of my three district offices in Raleigh (919-859-5999), Durham (919-688-3004), or Chapel Hill (919-967-7924). In the meantime, I hope you will continue to keep me informed of your views on issues before the Congress.