

SEN. BERNARD SANDERS

PREPARED REMARKS OF SEN. BERNARD SANDERS AT THE JOINT HEARING OF THE  
COMMITTEES ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
TO RECEIVE TESTIMONY FROM THE  
VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES

March 6, 2007

Chairman Akaka and Chairman Filner,

Let me begin by saying that I am very pleased that we are holding this joint House/Senate hearing on the budget for veterans' programs. For too long, the needs of our nation's veterans have been shortchanged and neglected by those whose agenda put tax cuts for the very wealthiest Americans ahead of the health care and benefits that our veterans have earned. Last fall, the American people told us loud and clear that they wanted Congress to move in a new direction that puts middle income and working families first. I view this hearing as an important step in making that a reality. I also want to welcome VFW Commander in Chief Gary Kurpus and all the VFW members who are here today from across the country. It is a pleasure to have you all here.

Most of us are aware of the disgraceful way this Administration and this Congress have treated our veterans over the last six years. Whether it is the Administration's 2003 decision to bar veterans who make as little as \$27,000 a year from the VA health care system on the grounds that they are wealthy or the effort to push hundreds of thousands of veterans out of the VA health care system with onerous and unnecessary copayment increases and new enrollment fees, the Bush Administration has openly demonstrated its willingness to abandon those who stood by us.

And, of course, the Administration's failure to keep faith with our veterans was mirrored in the Congress in the last six years. Joint House/Senate meetings were eliminated, veterans programs were substantially underfunded, and those in the previous majority who stood by our veterans were silenced.

Given this shameful record, it should not have come as a surprise to us that the Washington Post uncovered the scandalous treatment of our wounded service members at Walter Reed. While in and of itself this is a disgrace, the treatment of our service members at Walter Reed is symptomatic of an Administration that far too often seems to view American service members and veterans as little more than disposable press conference props. We must and we will force the Administration to correct the bureaucratic red tape, physical condition, and inadequate support services encountered by many of our veterans and soldiers at Walter Reed. My fear, and the fear of many others is that this is not just a problem at Walter Reed but one which extends to other facilities across our country. No matter where soldiers and veterans live in the US they must continue to be cared for.

Chairman Akaka and Chairman Filner, we need to say that the callous treatment of our soldiers and veterans ends today. With this new Congress, I believe that we have a fresh opportunity to re-establish our commitment to the men and women who have served our country. In my view, we must be as bold in our fight to protect our veterans and service members as have those who

have worked against them over the last six years. I know that both Chairmen here today share my desire to keep faith with our veterans.

To me, keeping faith with our veterans means ending the waiting lists for health care. Keeping faith with our veterans means ending the backlog of claims at the VA. Keeping faith with our veterans means investing in medical research that could develop the cures our veterans need. Keeping faith with our veterans means making sure that they are treated with respect and dignity and receive all the appropriate screening and treatment they need whether for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Traumatic Brain Injury, prosthetics or any other condition. Keeping faith with our veterans means putting them at the front of the line here in Congress ? not in the back of the line behind more and more tax breaks for wealthy campaign contributors and corporate welfare for large multi-national corporations.

To make that happen, my office is currently drafting comprehensive legislation that will address many of the issues that the veterans' organizations themselves have identified in their Independent Budget. Among other things this legislation would:

- ? End the bar on Category 8 veterans enrolling in the VA health care system;
- ? Eliminate the veterans disability tax for all veterans'
- ? Reduce and ultimately eliminate the backlog on claims at the VA'
- ? Increase burial benefits; and
- ? End the offset in benefits for survivors.

And this is only the tip of the iceberg Mr. Chairman, as far as what we need to do to get our veterans the treatment and care they are entitled.

In addition to this new legislation, I am happy to report that just last week the Democratic and Independent members of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee sent Senate Budget Committee Chairman Conrad our budget recommendations for the VA. Our budget recommendations include many positive increases in funding for veterans, but let me just list off a few:

- ? An increase of \$2.8 billion in medical services funding over the Administration=s request
- ? \$693 million in additional funding for mental health services (transition assistance, counseling, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder treatment etc)
- ? \$930 million for treating veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan
- ? An increase of \$303.4 million to improve both Traumatic Brain Injury and Polytrauma care and services
- ? An additional \$69 million over FY07 levels for a total funding level of at least \$481 million for Medical and Prosthetic Research
- ? Increased staff levels to make sure we have enough people to help process the benefit claims and reduce the current unacceptable backlog

All in all, if our recommendations are enacted into law the VA will have a budget increase of close to \$5 billion for fiscal year 2008.

Now as everyone here knows all too well the budget resolution is only one part of the long funding process here in Congress. But it is a positive and important first step and a sign of

changed priorities. And let me give you this commitment, as a member of the Senate Budget Committee I am going to fight to make sure that the budget contains substantial increases for veterans programs.

Chairmen Akaka and Chairman Filner, at a time when we have men and women in harm's way in Iraq, in Afghanistan, and in other places around the world, let us reverse the abandonment of our veterans that we have seen here in Washington over the last six years. Let us say loud and clear that the men and women who served this country in the past, and those who are serving her today, will get the health care and benefits that they and their comrades have earned. Thank you Mr. Chairman.