

Ranking Member Larry E. Craig

Statement of Senator Larry Craig

Ranking Member

Hearing on Benefits Legislation

May 9, 2007

Let me first thank our witnesses for responding to a task that I can only liken to the 12 labors of Hercules. Giving us your views on 26 bills is quite an undertaking. Thank you for your work.

Mr. Chairman, we have quite a challenge on our hands. If I had to venture a guess I'd say the collective cost of all 26 bills on today's agenda is over \$100 billion. And we have yet to even consider health care legislation, a task we will take up in a couple of weeks.

All of us on this Committee and in this Congress want to improve benefits and services for our veterans. I myself have six bills on today's agenda. But I am also committed to keeping our fiscal house in order, and I do not exempt my own legislation from that imperative.

Let me read from a budget letter signed a decade ago by all of the members, Republicans and Democrats, of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs. There are five of us who signed that letter still serving on the Committee today. The sentiments expressed were appropriate then, and I believe they provide an excellent framework for debate on new legislative proposals -- and how we should pay for those proposals -- today:

In preparing these comments, the Committee's members have kept in mind the fiscal limitations within which we must operate if we are to get Federal spending under control and thereby reduce the Federal deficit and debt. We believe that the Government can be fiscally responsible while still fulfilling its commitments to the most deserving among us -- including our Nation's veterans. We also are mindful of the fact that uncontrolled Federal spending threatens the long-term health of the Nation's economy and, in turn, could adversely affect the provision of veterans' benefits. Thus, we recognize that those who have worn the uniform in defense of the Nation seek, as we do, to protect the health of the Nation's economy.

With that Mr. Chairman, let me take a few minutes to give a brief description of each of my bills. Our witnesses will provide a fuller description in their testimony, so in the interest of time and to avoid redundancy, I will be brief.

- 1) S. 225 would expand eligibility for retroactive benefits under the traumatic injury protection under Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance program.

- 2) S. 1265 would expand eligibility for veterans' mortgage life insurance to include servicemembers receiving adapted housing grant assistance from VA.

- 3) S. 1266 would increase aid to states in interring veterans by increasing the plot allowance paid to states by VA; repealing the time limitation within which states must apply for reimbursements from VA; and expanding VA's ability to provide grants to states to operate state cemeteries.

- 4) S. 1289 would help ensure the long-term ability of the United States Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims to promptly dispense justice in all veterans cases.

- 5) S. 1290 would modernize outdated laws governing State approving agencies (SAAs) to meet the demands of today's veterans. It would do this by providing VA with flexibility in contracting with SAAs; enhancing coordination with other entities that approve educational institutions; and would promote greater accountability for performance.

....and finally,

- 6) S. 1293 would improve and update educational programs for veterans, Guard and Reserve members, and spouses and children of veterans.

This diverse selection of bills would, in my view, address a number of important issues affecting our veterans. I believe they provide a good starting point for improving and updating laws affecting veterans' benefits.

Again, thank you all for being here today. I look forward to hearing your testimony.

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