

WALDORF, MD - Congressman Steny Hoyer met today with veterans from throughout the state of Maryland to discuss issues important to military retirees and their families.

"I always appreciate the opportunity to get together with veterans in Maryland, to talk about issues that are important to the veterans' community," said Congressman Hoyer.

"Not only have you all honorably served our country, but you have made a choice to further the cause of your fellow veterans by joining one of the prestigious veterans service organizations and have taken a leadership role on behalf of veterans in our community," Representative Hoyer added.

Congressman Hoyer spoke to the veterans about the importance of the Veterans History Project, a project which he helped create to collect and preserve the audio and video- taped oral histories of America's war veterans and those who served in support of them.

"The importance of preserving the memories and unique personal histories of the men and women who answered their nation's call to service cannot be understated. Veterans have an individual story to tell about an experience that contributed to the history of our nation," added Representative Hoyer.

"We have seen the benefits and services for veterans whittled away over the years, but I can assure you that I fight and speak out to make sure that we meet the commitment and fulfill the promises we made to our veterans," Congressman Hoyer added at the meeting.

"I believe that irresponsible fiscal policies being pursued by this Administration have made it much more difficult to follow through on our commitments to those who served our nation.

"It is unconscionable that thousands of veterans wait six months or more for an appointment at a VA hospital. That number will only grow as more veterans come home from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This sends a very poor message to our troops in the field and to the young men and women who would like to serve in the future.

"Furthermore, I am adamantly opposed to proposals to increase premiums and prescription drug co-payments for veterans seeking to access health care. These new cost sharing requirements would force hundreds of thousands of veterans out of the health care system entirely.

"Last year, grassroots veterans and military retirees along with Democrats were successful in forcing Republicans to begin addressing the unfair disabled veterans' tax - even though Republicans failed to repeal it entirely.

"This year, I have heard from many veterans about the Survivor Benefit Program, and the unfair reduction in benefits when survivors turn 62. Democrats are working to end the injustice of the survivor benefit penalty and are demanding that Republicans take up legislation to eliminate this reduction.

"I have joined the majority of my Democratic colleagues in signing a petition to force the full House of Representatives to consider a bipartisan proposal to immediately end the benefit reduction received by a veteran's spouse when they turn 62 and protect the retirement benefits earned by military retirees.

"Thousands of military retirees in Maryland pay premiums for years and anticipate that upon their death, their spouse will receive 55 percent of their benefit. But when their spouse reaches 62, the benefit drops to a mere 35 percent - forcing these survivors to give up more than one-third of their retirement benefit when they are eligible for Social Security benefits.

"Even though it has 306 cosponsors in the house - both Republicans and Democrats - the Republican leadership has failed to schedule this measure for a vote.

"Democrats are sending a powerful message that America will always care for those who serve. I believe we ought to meet our obligations to our veterans and I will continue to support increases in funding for veterans programs," Representative Hoyer concluded.

Congressman Hoyer has been a leader in Congress in defending the interests of veterans. This year, Congressman Hoyer was named one of the American Legion's "Unsung Heroes" of the 108th Congress.

"The 108th Congress passed a record increase in Department of Veterans Affairs health care funding for the current fiscal year, and it reduced the number of service-disabled military retirees subject to a 'disability tax' on their retired pay," National Commander John Brieden said. "By old-fashioned grass-roots advocacy, the men and women of The American Legion fought hard for this legislation. I commend Representative Hoyer for taking a leadership role in making that happen."

Congressman Hoyer was also honored by the Disabled American Veterans and was named one of their Gold Leaders. "This award has been bestowed in appreciate for your generosity; because you never forgot the price paid for freedom; and for your steadfast loyalty to our American Heroes," National Commander Alan W. Bowers noted on the award.

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