

BOWIE, MD - Congressman Steny Hoyer (D-MD) today joined leaders from the veterans' community from across the state of Maryland to discuss issues important to veterans, military retirees and their families, particularly the Fiscal Year 2006 Republican federal budget, passed in the House of Representatives last week, which slashes veterans benefits and increases the fees for veterans enrolling in the VA Health Care system. Congressman Hoyer released the following statement after the meeting.

“The Veterans Medical Care System is facing ever-increasing demand leaving the VA struggling to provide the care that Veterans have earned and deserve. The VA has seen a 134 percent increase in the number of enrolled veterans from 1996 to 2004. Unfortunately, VA health-care funding has increased only 60 percent over the same period.

“As troops return home from Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, the VA will eventually become responsible for many of their health care needs, particularly for those with injuries that may last a lifetime. As of December 2004, VA had treated roughly 32,700 of the 210,000 veterans from these deployments.

“Further, by law, VA is required to provide ‘hospital care, medical services, and nursing home care for any illness’ determined to be service connected for these returning service members for a period of two years.

“Despite this obvious need, the GOP budget fails to adequately fund Veterans priorities in the budget and instead proposes increasing enrollment fees and prescription drug co-pays for some veterans - a Health Care Tax - and cutting funds for important programs.

“Furthermore, the Republican budget resolutions do absolutely nothing to rein in the exploding deficits and spiraling debt that have been provoked by the Republican Party’s failed economic policies. In fact, Republican budget proposals will immorally force future generations to pay our bills.

“The budget essentially cuts funds to the VA to pay for trillions in tax cuts that disproportionately benefit the wealthiest Americans and which will burden future generations - without requiring that these tax cuts be paid for so they don’t contribute to the ballooning deficit.

“The budget raises health care costs for 2.2 million veterans by imposing increased co-payments on prescription drugs and new enrollment fees. According to the Administration’s own figures, this will result in driving 213,000 veterans out of the system.

“And, the President’s budget provides \$3.5 billion less than veterans service organizations believe is needed. Without the new fees proposed by the President, the President’s budget provides \$762 million less than the Congressional Budget Office says is needed to maintain current services for veterans’ health care and other discretionary programs.

“The budget proposal slashes funds from veterans’ nursing homes and virtually eliminates state grants. This will leave older and disabled veterans with no place to go.

“Finally, the budget fails to expedite disability claims. There is a backlog of almost 500,000 compensation and pension claims and since 2001, the number of pending appeals has nearly doubled. Regrettably, the President’s budget reduces the staff for the Board of Veterans Appeals, even though these pending appeals take years to resolve.

“In contrast, the Democratic Alternative budget that was rejected by Republicans in the House of Representatives would have provided \$1.6 billion more than the Republican budget for veterans programs for 2006 and \$17 billion more over five years. This funding would have improved access and reduced waiting time for all veterans; accommodated new health care demands, particularly those returning from Iraq and Afghanistan; met statutory requirements for long-term care by increasing the current number of nursing home beds to 1998 levels; increased funds for medical facility construction and renovation; and provided the resources necessary for more responsive reviews of claims and appeals.

“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.”

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