

March 20, 2009: Weekly Washington Update

Early this week I was deeply disturbed to hear that President Barack Obama suggested that to save money in the Veterans Administration budget, he would undermine one of the department's key services: providing health care to our Nation's veterans who were injured while serving our country. The President's proposal would bill veteran's private health insurance plans for care and treatment of service-connected injuries or disabilities. I was gravely concerned at the suggestion for two key reasons. First, we have made a commitment to our veterans that we would take care of their needs for serving our nation selflessly and honorably. Secondly, it could potentially discourage employers from hiring veterans with injuries as it may increase their health care premiums.

Upon hearing this proposal, I joined sixty-nine other Members of Congress from both sides of the aisle that same day in a letter asking the President to reconsider his position. I was relieved to hear that he subsequently reversed course and will continue to honor our vow of care to those who have served us in great sacrifice. To this end, I have cosponsored additional legislation to ensure America meets its obligations to those who are injured while serving in our military.

First, I actively support the Military Retirees Health Care Protection Act which expresses the sense of Congress that the Department of Defense (DOD) and the nation have a committed obligation to provide health benefits for retired military personnel that exceeds the obligation of corporate employers to civilian employees and that the DOD has many additional options to constrain the growth of health care spending in ways that do not disadvantage beneficiaries. DOD should pursue those options rather than seeking large fee increases for beneficiaries. This legislation is a direct answer to any future attempts to limit veteran's health benefits.

Namely, it prohibits an increase in a premium, deductible, copayment, or other charge prescribed by the Secretary of Defense for medical and dental health care coverage for military personnel and the dollar amount of a cost-sharing requirement under the DOD pharmacy benefits program. Additionally, it prohibits charges for DOD inpatient care from exceeding \$535 per day and prevents an increase in premiums under TRICARE for certain members of the Selected Reserve beginning on January 1, 2009.

Next, I am also a cosponsor of the Federal and Military Retiree Health Care Equity Act which would amend the Internal Revenue Code to permit: federal civilian and military retirees to pay Federal Employees Health Benefits Program and TRICARE supplemental premiums on a pretax basis. This legislation would exclude premiums from gross income and creates a tax deduction available to both itemizers and non-itemizers for TRICARE supplemental premiums or enrollment fees.

I vow to continue to honor and strengthen our bond with our nation's wounded warriors. These brave individuals suffer the scars of their service to our Nation for the remainder of their lifetime, and we must provide them the comfort and care that they have earned in service. I continue to be humbled by the work of our soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen as they serve our nation at home and overseas and I will fight for them here in Congress for what is only right.

Congressman Rob Wittman represents the First District of Virginia. He was elected to his first full term in November 2008 and serves on the Natural Resources Committee and the Armed Services Committee where he is the Ranking Member of the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee.

