

Congress Calls on Bush to End Policy Preventing Veterans from Receiving VA Health Care

For Immediate Release: November 14, 2007

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Congress Calls on Bush Administration to End Policy Preventing Veterans from Receiving VA Health Care

Reps. Rothman and Israel Lead Bipartisan Letter to President Bush and Acting VA Secretary Calling for End to Means-Testing Policy for VA Health Care

(Washington, DC)—In the wake of a new study reporting that nearly 2 million veterans are now uninsured, Congressman Steve Rothman (D-NJ), Congressman Steve Israel (D-NY), and a bipartisan group of 19 of their House colleagues sent a letter to President Bush asking him to reverse a 2003 means-testing policy that has prevented over 273,000 veterans from receiving Veterans' Administration (VA) health care.

"Denying health care to former soldiers is wrong. Yet, to save money, President Bush has ordered Veterans' Administration hospitals to refuse to care for hundreds of thousands of veterans known as 'priority 8.' Under Bush's guidelines, that means more than one in three former service members is prevented from enrolling in the VA health care system. This situation is appalling," said Congressman Rothman.

"A veteran is a veteran and our country promised to respect and take care of all those who put their lives on the line for our freedoms. I implore President Bush to allow every veteran seeking care at the VA to receive it," Rothman added.

"With the war in Iraq costing the country \$12 billion per month, it's baffling that President Bush would seek to balance the budget on the back of veterans," said Congressman Israel. "The fact that there are 1.8 million uninsured veterans is a national disgrace. It is entirely unacceptable that we are willing to send Americans into harm's way without guaranteeing health care upon their return home. I challenge President Bush to accept the veterans funding increase passed by Congress and remove the restrictions he's placed on veterans seeking health care."

Since 2000, the number of uninsured veterans has increased by over 235,000, to 1.8 million nationwide. Many of these veterans were prevented from receiving care through the Veterans Administration (VA) health system because of Bush administration policies enacted in 2003, including income restrictions and the termination of veterans' health outreach programs. Additional veterans were prevented from receiving care because of waiting lists at VA health facilities or lack of services in their communities.

In January 2003, the Bush Administration began banning so-called "Priority 8" veterans from the VA health system. Priority 8 veterans have annual incomes exceeding the VA-set threshold (on average these incomes range between \$30-35,000 nationwide) and that do not have service-connected injuries. While these incomes are deemed too high to qualify for VA health care by the Administration, they are often too low for the veterans to purchase private health insurance,

particularly in high-cost areas like New York and New Jersey.

The policy change has prevented over 273,000 veterans from receiving health care, with the average age of the affected veteran at 62.8 years. Additionally, another 300,000 veterans forwent health care since 2002 because of waiting lists for enrollment or lack of available, timely appointments.

Earlier this month, the House approved a conference report for legislation that includes the largest increase to veterans' health care in the VA's 77-year history. The \$3.7 billion increase from the President's Budget will allow the Veterans Health Administration to treat the over 5.8 million patients it is expecting in 2008 (an increase of 54,000 patients from 2007). The bill, which President Bush has said he will veto, would also add 1,800 additional claims processors to work-down the backlog of benefits claims and to reduce the time to process new claims.

Israel and Rothman's letter, which is included below, asks President Bush and Veterans Administration Acting Secretary Gordon Mansfield to overturn the policy preventing Priority 8 veterans from receiving VA health care. Rothman has also introduced legislation, the "Honor Our Commitment to Veterans Act," (H.R. 463) which would reverse the Priority 8 veterans' enrollment freeze.

A copy of the letter follows:

As you may know, a study recently conducted by researchers at Harvard University Medical School brought to light the adverse effects of the Department of Veterans Affairs' policies that have resulted in an excessive number of veterans who do not have health insurance.

The VA policy to deny enrollment to "Priority 8" veterans based on income levels, enacted in 2003, has left too many veterans without means for sufficient health care. It is time that we lift this "administrative freeze." The Harvard study found that the number of uninsured veterans has jumped by 235,000 between 2000 and 2004, reaching 1.8 million in 2004. The study also found that more than 3.8 million members of veteran households were completely uninsured, not even getting coverage from the VA.

H.R. 463, The Honor Our Commitment to Veterans Act would reverse the freeze by requiring the Secretary to enroll any eligible veteran who applies for health care with the Veterans Administration. This is important legislation, but we also believe that the Department of Veterans Affairs must take action independently to lift this administrative freeze. It should not take an Act of Congress for the Administration to take responsibility for this problem.

No one should have to go to war, risk their life, get injured and come home to inadequate care. It is our responsibility to take care of those who fought for our country and it is deplorable that the federal government would deny any veteran adequate health care.

We appreciate your prompt attention to this matter. Should you have any questions or concerns regarding this request, please do not hesitate to contact us or have your staff contact Swati Bindra in Rep. Israel's office at (202) 225-3335 and Marc Cevasco in Rep. Rothman's office at (202)-225-5061.

Sincerely,

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