



Congressional Record

PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE 108th CONGRESS, FIRST SESSION

MONDAY, December 8, 2003

House of Representatives

A DISAPPOINTING YEAR FOR VETERAN'S HEALTH CARE FUNDING

**HON. BOB FILNER
OF CALIFORNIA**

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

MR. FILNER: Mr. Speaker and colleagues, I must express my extreme disappointment and dismay at the amount of funding in the Consolidated Appropriations Act for FY2004 for the health care of our nation's veterans.

For almost an entire year, the Members of the House Veterans Affairs Committee (both Democratic and Republican) have been fighting for a budget that is worthy of our veterans. The \$26.3 billion that is included for the FY2004 VA Medical Care Budget in this appropriations bill is approaching a billion less than the figure recommended by the House VA Committee and by the Independent Budget, the budget that is drafted by veterans. One billion dollars would fund approximately 5000 doctors or 10,000 nurses or 3 million additional outpatient visits.

As many of you know, VA Secretary Anthony Principi has been forced, because of lack of funds, to refuse enrollment to many veterans in the VA health care system. Waiting lists for health care appointments include tens of thousands of veterans who are waiting more than six months for their first health care appointment at the VA. This is not the message that we want to send to our troops who are fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq. Now, at this time more than ever, we must place veterans as a top priority. This appropriations bill does not do that.

Veterans' health care is one of our most important funding issues. We hope and pray that we do not have veterans from the current conflict who become ill with Gulf War illnesses. But we must be prepared for that possibility. We must also not forget the warriors of the first Gulf War

(over)

who are sick and still waiting to learn the cause and the cure for their illnesses. We must be ready to give treatment and care to all the men and women who have sacrificed for our country. We cannot guarantee that with the budget figures in this bill.

It is time to stop this frustrating and ineffective funding for veterans' health care. It is time to change the process of funding VA medical care. Congressman Lane Evans, Ranking Democratic Member of the House VA Committee, has introduced a bill (H.R. 2318), which I have co-sponsored, to automatically increase VA health care funding each year to

accommodate inflation and new enrollees. We must change from our current practice of discretionary funding for VA healthcare to mandatory (or assured) funding, the way we fund many other veterans' benefits. That change would do away with the fight we have to make each year in Congress for our veterans--a fight that, unfortunately, we often end up losing.

We have the resources. It is a question of priorities. It is a question of will. Join me in vowing that this will be the last year we end up with less money than is needed for veterans' health care. Join me in pushing for passage of assured funding for our nation's veterans.