

WASHINGTON – U.S. Rep. Harry Mitchell this evening voted to make improving veterans' health care a top national priority by securing the funding to hire more doctors, reduce waiting times for doctors' appointments and provide more assistance to veterans suffering from traumatic brain injury (TBI) and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

The House passed the Military Construction/Veterans Affairs', and Labor-Health-Education Appropriations Conference Report for FY 2008 by a 269-142 vote.

"At a time of war and incredible need, the last Congress slashed veterans' funding and we're seeing the effects of that today," said Mitchell. "It is absolutely critical that we deliver to our nations' veterans the health care and benefits that they have earned and deserve."

National veterans' groups have praised the new Congress' investment in veterans' care. AMVETS, Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America and Veterans of Foreign Wars described the bill as "a significant, much-needed investment in health care and the benefits delivery system for our nation's sick and disabled veterans." [Source: Disabled American Veterans]

The legislation includes the following investments in veterans' care:

- Increases the VA budget by \$6.7 billion above the FY 2007 level, making it the largest single increase in the 77-year history of the Veterans' Administration,
- Significantly reduces the 400,000 claims backlog for veterans waiting for disability and other benefits by adding more than 1,100 new claims processors,
- Provides much-needed maintenance of VA health care facilities. The VA recently outlined 1,000 specific problems at VA health facilities around the country with a backlog of \$5 billion in maintenance,
- Provides \$480 million for medical and prosthetic research, \$66 million more than the current level, and \$69 million more than the President's request, and
- Provides \$600 million more than the President's request for mental health, PTSD and Traumatic Brain Injury and makes five polytrauma centers and three Centers of Excellence for Mental Health and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) fully operational this year to care for those returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, including those with TBI.

The Military Construction/Veterans' Affairs, and Labor-Health-Education Appropriations Conference Report also secured several key victories for Arizona, including a \$500,000 investment in Phoenix's Translational Genomics Research Institute, or TGen.

"In the innovation age, America's economy will become increasingly dependent on the cutting-edge research, and the nation will look to Arizona for leadership," Mitchell said.

TGen is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to advanced genomics-based health research in human diseases, human pathogens and infectious diseases and the anchor project for the Phoenix Biosciences Center, an alliance bringing together the three major state universities and

the City of Phoenix to establish an academic and bioscience research park in downtown Phoenix.

Mitchell's funding requests also focused on addressing the nation's nursing shortage. The bill provided:

- \$175,000 for Enfermeras En Escalera, a model program for addressing the nursing shortage in both Arizona in an innovative and cost-effective way. The program creates a fast track program for internationally-educated nurses who are legal residents or citizens of the United States.
- \$100,000 for the Online Registered Nurse Recertification Program, an innovative and model program for helping Arizona address the nursing shortage in a cost effective manner in a short time frame.

"Our nation has a growing nursing shortage, and here in Arizona, we're looking to find solutions," said Mitchell.

The Military Construction/Veterans' Affairs, and Labor-Health-Education Appropriations Conference Report also

- Increases the maximum Pell Grant award to \$4,435 from \$4,310,
- Invests in life-saving medical research by providing \$30 billion – a \$1.1 billion increase – for the National Institutes of Health, and
- Better protects Americans for terrorism preparedness and response by appropriating \$6.5 billion for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a \$192 million increase from the current level,
- Invests \$420 million in FY 2010 for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, \$20 million more than the current level.

Mitchell also secured \$150,000 for Making Every Student Accountable (M.E.S.A.), which will fund start-up and evaluation costs for expansion of M.E.S.A. into four inner city schools, reaching approximately 500 at-risk youth. M.E.S.A., which was developed through a partnership among Mesa Public Schools, the Mesa Police Department, local businesses, and community organizations, provides out-of-school enrichment, mentoring, and positive youth development activities targeting at-risk youth to improve academic performance and reduce drop-out rates and at-risk behaviors, including gang involvement.