

WASHINGTON, D.C. - U.S. Sens. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) and Claire McCaskill (D-Mo.) and Reps. Rahm Emanuel (D-Ill.) and Harry Mitchell (D-Ariz.) today announced the introduction of the Dignity for Wounded Warriors Act of 2007 aimed at ensuring injured soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan receive the care they deserve.

Prompted by accounts of unacceptable conditions and interminable bureaucracy at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in a recent Washington Post article, the lawmakers proposed the Dignity for Wounded Warriors Act to address the need for improvements to facilities, procedures and services related to outpatient care for wounded and recovering service members at active military hospitals.

The bill - introduced in both the Senate and the House this week - will direct the Department of Defense (DOD) to reduce the burdens of the current system on recovering service members and families. Specifically, the legislation will require improvements to facilities and increased inspections; reduced paperwork and less red tape; and provide improved counseling for service members and their families. The bill will require the DOD to meet these objectives while still allowing the agency flexibility to find and employ innovative solutions.

The legislation also provides important new support for military families, including medical care and job counseling for family members while caring for injured loved ones at military facilities. It also creates federal protections to prevent them from being fired while they are away from their jobs.

The legislation also creates a Wounded Warrior Oversight Board to monitor the Pentagon's implementation of these reforms and to serve as an independent advocacy board for outpatients. The board, comprised of veterans, wounded service members, family members and medical experts, will play an active role in ensuring that the nation's recovering soldiers receive quality care.

"Caring for our returning heroes is one of the things we can still get right about this war, and that's why the deterioration of the conditions at Walter Reed is both appalling and unacceptable," said U.S. Senator Barack Obama, a member of the Veterans' Affairs Committee. "The brave men and women wounded at war should receive the best we have to offer and the highest quality of care, and that's why this legislation would cut red tape, improve service, and require frequent inspections of all active duty military hospitals."

"After reading the Washington Post article last week, I had to ask myself: is the system trying to get these soldiers help or trying to shut them out?" said McCaskill, a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee. "Our brave men and women returning from war deserve so much better, and this bill will help make sure that happens in the future."

Rep. Emanuel said, "Our wounded young men and women in uniform returning home from war deserve better than moldy walls, dilapidated facilities, and miles of red tape. This legislation will ensure these brave men and women can recover and recuperate with dignity they deserve and the care they've been promised."

"The men and women returning from Iraq and Afghanistan deserve world class treatment, and this legislation sets the guidelines for providing that treatment," said Mitchell, the chairman of the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations for the House Veterans' Affairs Committee. "The care wounded soldiers receive in the weeks and months after their injuries have a direct impact on their future needs as veterans."

Attached is a copy of the bill and below is a summary.

### Dignity for Wounded Warriors Act

The "Dignity for Wounded Warriors" Act ensures that wounded service members receive the treatment, care and services they deserve. The bill will require improved facilities and robust inspections; will reduce paperwork and eliminate red tape for recovering service members; provide improved counseling services for servicemembers and their families; and give improved support for families of recovering servicemembers. The bill also provides for a Wounded Warrior Oversight Group to monitor the progress and ensure that the nation's recovering service members receive the highest quality of care possible.

### Ensuring Safe, Clean Housing:

The Washington Post revealed unacceptable living conditions for many outpatients at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, the flagship military hospital, including moldy walls, broken elevators, and general disrepair in recovering servicemember barracks. The Dignity for Wounded Warriors Act:

- Establishes standards for military outpatient housing-including that outpatient dormitories must match the existing service standard for active-duty barracks-and that repair requests must be completed within 15 days or alternate housing must be offered.
- Establishes a zero-tolerance policy for pest infestation.
- Creates an inspection regime to ensure high-level military officials are aware of problems at medical facilities.
- Requires an EMT and Crisis Counselor at all outpatient residences 24 hours a day.

### Reducing Paperwork and Bureaucracy:

It takes an average of 209 days for soldiers to go through the process of determining whether or not they can remain in the military and, if not, at what level of disability they will be assessed and discharged. This process is made more complicated with duplicative requirements, extensive paperwork, and inefficient case management. The bill:

- Brings the Physical Disability Evaluation System (PDES) under one command to reduce bureaucratic red tape and unnecessary delays.
- Calls for injury-specific PDES procedures to allow the most severely injured service members to bypass unnecessary and lengthy steps.
- Requires that PDES system be available and accessible entirely online so that service

members and case managers can more easily complete paperwork requirements.

- Requires a single location for PDES processing at hospitals that serve more than 100 recovering servicemembers.
- Requires the Pentagon to identify and implement other ways to streamline PDES.

### Improving Casework:

Some caseworkers at Walter Reed have to care for 50 or more recovering soldiers, helping them schedule appointments, caring for their everyday needs, and helping fill out paperwork. Military caseworkers are overwhelmed, leading to some service members falling through the cracks. The Dignity for Wounded Warriors Act:

- Increases the number of caseworkers.
- Establishes an interim ratio of 1 caseworker and 1 supervising NCO for each 20 recovering service members.
- Requires that the Pentagon establish target ratios for each military treatment facility according requirements of the patient population.
- Requires an evaluation of staff training and requires special focus on training for identification of mental illness and suicide prevention.

### Caring for Family Members:

Family members often have to leave behind jobs to care for injured servicemembers. If they are not beneficiaries, they often have to pay for their own medical care, and face confusing bureaucracy and inadequate support. The Dignity for Wounded Warriors Act:

- Provides federal protections for the jobs of family members who are caring for recovering servicemembers, so they do not have to choose between caring for their loved one and keeping their job.
- Extends medical care to family members while they are living at military treatment facilities.
- Extends employment services to care-giving family members.
- Strengthens existing anonymous crisis counseling and respite services.

### Increasing Availability of Information and Assistance:

Wounded troops and their families often have trouble understanding the bureaucratic process of getting care and determining whether they can stay in the military. The bill:

- Creates 2 new 24 hour bi-lingual hotlines (a crisis counseling hotline and a family assistance and respite hotline).
- Requires the creation of a single manual for outpatient care procedures, including PDES, family support, personnel processing and finance requirements and requires that it be made

available online.

- Establishes an "ombudsman" for recovering servicemember outpatient care in each major medical command.
- Increases feedback outlets including requiring monthly town halls, and development of new anonymous feedback outlets.

Creation of an Oversight Board:

One of the fundamental causes of the problems at Walter Reed was a lack of accountability. The Dignity in Care Act:

- Creates a Wounded Warrior Oversight Board appointed by Congressional leadership that will oversee implementation of the act and serve as a constant advocate for recovering servicemembers into the future.