FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

112th Congress must continue in “right direction” for veterans

WASHINGTON (Nov. 8, 2010) – The American Legion is pressing the prospective leadership of a politically re-oriented 112th Congress to address several longstanding veterans issues. “The dramatic mid-term election just concluded was a referendum on ideals and policies,” said Jimmie Foster, the Legion’s national commander. “But not on issues related to the care of America’s veterans. The 111th Congress was moving in the right direction, and the 112th should continue on this course.”

Foster recently praised the current session’s Capitol Hill lawmakers for passage of the Veterans Health Care Budget Reform and Transparency Act of 2009 (guaranteeing appropriations for VA health care one full year in advance) as well as the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2010 that included substantially increased fiscal 2010 funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

“As laudable as these measures were – and others such as broadening eligibility for relief from certain service-connected health problems, more must be done to provide our nation’s heroes with the benefits they deserve,” Foster said. “About 20 new representatives are veterans, and 14 of those belong to The American Legion, so we’re hoping they will lend their strong support to our legislative priorities.”

Of special concern to Legion leadership is the so-called “disabled veteran tax” or “concurrent receipt” practice, by which the retirement pay of veterans is offset according to the amount of disability pay they are receiving. “Both retirement pay and disability benefits are well and truly earned, and both should be awarded fully. To do otherwise is shameful,” Foster said.

While acknowledging the recent, unprecedented increase in VA funding ($125 billion), The American Legion is requesting additional monies for the agency, mostly to support improved medical care, research and facilities. But the Legion is also offering Congress a suggestion that, if enacted, would help to offset any VA budget increase.

Legion leaders point to the fact that more than half the veteran population served by VA is eligible for Medicare benefits. Yet VA is not authorized to collect third-party reimbursement from Medicare (or Medicaid) for health services provided to veterans that have no connection to their military service.

“In a society that’s trying to improve health care, reduce deficits and serve veterans, allowing VA to bill Medicare for its non-service connected care is a win-win,” said Tim
Tetz, legislative director for The American Legion. “Veterans pay into the Medicare system, so why shouldn’t they be allowed to take advantage of it?”

Among other items of concern to The American Legion are deficiencies in the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill that provides educational benefits to veterans attending four-year colleges and universities. Improvements can be made, says the Legion, by broadening eligibility for benefits to members of reserve units and the National Guard, as well as expanding the list of VA-approved institutions to include vocational schools and those offering online and distance learning curricula.

Peter Gaytan, executive director of The American Legion in Washington, sums up the organization’s view. “Realistically, the new Congress may be hard-pressed to find a non-partisan agenda that all its members can agree on. But why not try to bridge that chasm by agreeing to honor our nation’s veterans, not only by maintaining their current benefits but improving them as well?” he said.

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