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Reps. Murphy, Larson Highlight Historic Commitment to Veterans Funding

Democrats increase veterans funding by nearly \$12M, highest increase of 77 year history of VA

HARTFORD, CT - Today, Congressmen John Larson (CT-1) and Congressman Chris Murphy (CT-5) held a press conference in Hartford with local veterans to highlight Democrats' record commitment to our nation's troops and veterans. This year, House Democrats have pushed for record increases in veterans' health care and benefits programs, totaling nearly \$12 billion, to meet the needs of returning veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan. With the largest single increase to the Veterans Administration (VA) budget in the 77 year history of the agency, this year's budget increase will assist the more than 251,000 veterans and soldiers in Connecticut returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. Next year, the VA is expecting to treat 5.8 million patients, including 263,000 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans.

"For too many years our nation's veterans have been shortchanged when it comes to providing quality healthcare and services. Our actions send a clear message to America's servicemen and women, their families, and our veterans that a grateful nation deeply respects their service and sacrifice," said Larson.

"Supporting such a large increase to our Veterans Affairs budget this year was simply a no-brainer. Congress is finally acting to get our nation's men and women, who have sacrificed so much, the health care that they deserve," said Murphy.

This effort began in January, when Larson, the Vice-Chair of the House Democratic Caucus, and Murphy, a new Member elected to change the way Washington works, quickly moved a funding bill that gives a \$3.4 billion increase in VA funding to meet the needs of an estimated 219,000 new veterans entering the VA system in 2007.

Connecticut is home to Veterans Centers in New Haven, Hartford, and Norwich. With the funding increases expected to pass this year, these centers may see an estimated 17% increase from FY07 to FY08. New Haven has a Global War on Terror (GWOT) counselor and is recruiting another member for its staff. Hartford has a GWOT counselor and a part-time Military Sexual Trauma Counselor. Norwich is planning to add another member to its staff.

An estimated one-third of veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are facing mental health challenges. The Military Construction and Veterans Affairs bill, which recently passed the House of Representatives with Murphy and Larson's support, provides \$600 million more than the President's request for mental health, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and traumatic brain injuries.

"I can't imagine how the Veterans Administration could handle the needs of recently returning soldiers without this historic funding increase. This nation is asking our brave men and women to perform heroic tasks across the globe, and we must be ready to care for them when they return. This year, we have lived up to our end of the bargain," said Murphy.

"There are over 250,000 veterans living in Connecticut and many more that will come home from Iraq and Afghanistan. They are our nation's heroes and have served and protected our nation with pride and dignity. We must give them the care and respect worthy of their sacrifice and they deserve no less," added Larson.

Larson also unveiled the VETS-21 (21st Century Veterans Equal Treatment Act) legislation he will be introducing in July, with Murphy's support, that will address veteran's access to quality healthcare. The bill addresses the glaring inequities that exist in the veteran's health care system by guaranteeing adequate health care for the nation's veterans by allowing them to receive the same service they would qualify for through the VA at non-VA medical facilities, should the VA be unable to meet its stated performance goals.

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