



## **BARACK OBAMA: FULFILLING A SACRED TRUST WITH OUR VETERANS IN PUERTO RICO**

There are more than 125,000 veterans in Puerto Rico. Puerto Rican veterans have served with distinction and honor to the United States armed forces since becoming U.S. citizens in 1917. And, since 9/11, over 5,000 active duty service members and veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars have sought VA health care in Puerto Rico. As a member of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Barack Obama has fought to end benefit disparities, bring homeless veterans in off the streets, strengthen mental health care, add billions of dollars in additional Department of Veterans Affairs funding, and reform a system that often places barriers between veterans and the benefits they have earned. Puerto Rico's soldiers and families have fought valiantly for this nation, and Barack Obama believes that we should serve our returning heroes as well as they've served us.

As president, he will honor the sacred trust that America has with Puerto Rico's veterans. In an Obama administration, the VA will provide benefits and care that will be accessible, high-quality, reliable, responsive and fair, year after year. He will care for our wounded soldiers; improve the transition to civilian life; fully fund VA medical care; improve the quality of VA health care; fix the Veterans Benefits Administration; honor veterans with the benefits and services they have earned, and rebuild and repair the military. Not only is this the right thing to do – it is a necessary investment for a great nation to maintain an all-volunteer force.

**Improve the San Juan Veterans Affairs Medical Center:** The San Juan Veterans Affairs Medical Center serves nearly 68,000 veterans a year and consists of the main medical center located in San Juan, Puerto Rico, with satellite clinics located in Ponce, Guayama, Arecibo, and Mayagüez. The San Juan facility is a primary receiving center for casualties in VA and Department of Defense contingency planning. It also has several specialized programs ranging from spinal cord injuries to a Post Traumatic Stress Disorder program, among others. The San Juan VA facility, which was built nearly 40 years ago, is vulnerable to seismic activity, and structural improvements are acutely needed. Upgrading the main hospital includes addressing the seismic-structural issues of the building, the ventilation system, parking, and the special needs of the 1,500 female veterans currently accessing the system. In addition, the needs of paralyzed and disabled veterans require immediate and special attention.

The VA has already begun building a seismically correct bed tower that will house 315 new beds and is scheduled to be completed in summer 2009. Barack Obama recognizes that this is a first step in correcting critical deficiencies at the San Juan VA. Veteran demands continue to grow on the Island, and the patient population has increased, with new veterans arriving daily from Iraq and Afghanistan, while space is still lacking.

Obama believes we need to provide Puerto Rico's returning service members with the care and benefits they deserve. As president, Obama is committed to reviewing this nationwide problem and will work to improve the San Juan VA and ensure that our veterans receive the high-quality medical services they need in a timely way. Obama will work to provide the San Juan VA, including the existing satellite health clinics, and an additional

clinic in Ceiba, with the resources necessary to improve the quality of the medical services provided to veterans in Puerto Rico.

**Honor Fallen Heroes:** In Puerto Rico, there is one VA national cemetery in Bayamon that was ranked the 22<sup>nd</sup> busiest cemetery on interment workload. In 2006, the Puerto Rico National Cemetery had 1,474 burials, and it is estimated that this cemetery will reach capacity within five years. As senator, Barack Obama voted to increase the burial plot allowance for our fallen heroes, which has not kept pace with the rising costs of funerals. He was also proud to join his colleagues in prohibiting disrespectful fringe groups from protesting at military funerals, because Obama believes that this tests the bounds of fundamental human compassion. As president, Obama will continue to protect these basic benefits and rights so that our honorable veterans can be laid to rest with the dignity and respect they deserve. Obama supports the decision of the Department of Veterans Affairs to construct a second veterans cemetery in Puerto Rico, pending local appropriation, to be located in Aguadilla.

### **CARE FOR THE WOUNDED**

**Care for Our Wounded Warriors:** The scandal at Walter Reed Army Medical Center brought to light that as a nation, we don't always match our words with actions when it comes to providing returning service members with the care they deserve. In the Senate, Barack Obama led a bipartisan effort to remedy both the immediate and more systematic shortcomings that contributed to the deplorable conditions causing wounded warriors to fight a second battle at home. The Senate passed legislation based on several Obama proposals, including measures to improve medical outpatient facilities, slash red tape, reform the disability review process, strengthen mental health care support, and add needed health care benefits for family members caring for loved ones. Separately, the Senate passed an Obama measure to provide these family members with a year of job protection so they don't have to choose between caring for a loved one and keeping their jobs.

**Improve Mental Health Treatment:** Veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are coming home with record levels of combat stress, but our military and VA medical systems are not adequately providing for them. Earlier this month, Obama sent a letter to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs asking him to investigate reports that a psychologist at a Texas VA facility told staff members to refrain from diagnosing veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in order to reduce costs. Barack Obama will improve mental health care at every stage of military service—recruitment, deployment, and reentry into civilian life:

- **Recruitment:** Recruiting more mental health professionals; improving screening; and instituting fairness by guaranteeing that if the military determines on the front end that an individual is fit to serve, that individual will not be denied benefits on the back end on the grounds of a “preexisting” condition.
- **Active Duty, Training, and Deployment:** Placing more mental health professionals with troops as they train, deploy, and return; fighting the stigma of psychological injury by enhancing training; and helping military families by offering more counseling and support to family members.
- **Return to Civilian Life:** Requiring individual, face-to-face post-deployment mental health screenings; increasing the VA budget to recruit and retain more mental health professionals; making PTSD benefits claims fairer and more accurate by providing better training and guidance to personnel; and expanding Vet Centers in rural areas so that veterans and their families can get the care they need where they live.

**Improve Care for Traumatic Brain Injury:** In 2005, Barack Obama helped stop a VA effort to force some veterans to prove again that they suffered from PTSD to maintain their benefits. He also passed an amendment ensuring that all service members would be properly screened for TBI. In 2007, Obama helped introduce a bill to personalize and improve overall care for TBI patients.

**Ease the Transition of Veterans into Civilian Life:** In September 2006, Barack Obama introduced legislation that would help troops transition to civilian life after they leave the military. His legislation would provide new veterans with electronic medical and service records, monitor health trends and improve transportation services.

## **IMPROVE VA MEDICAL CARE**

**Make VA a Leading Edge of National Health Reform:** Barack Obama's comprehensive national health care plan will modernize health care delivery, including in Puerto Rico. That includes disease management, preventive treatment, coordinated care teams, better use of information technology, and research into which treatments work best. As the nation's largest integrated health system, the Veterans Health Administration has already been a national leader in reform, particularly with electronic health records and prevention initiatives. Obama will continue this trend to make the VA a leader of national health care reform so that veterans get the best care possible. This includes efforts to improve electronic records interoperability, expand effectiveness research, promote wellness programs, and instill more accountability for performance and quality improvement initiatives.

**Strengthen VA Specialty Care:** Advances in technology have meant that the survival rate for U.S. service members is higher now than in any previous conflict. There will be a long-term need for strengthened specialty care within the VA, including additional polytrauma centers as well as centers of excellence for Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), PTSD, vision impairment, prosthetics, spinal cord injury, aging, women's health and other specialized rehabilitative care. In the Senate, Barack Obama has supported the expansion of PTSD and TBI centers of excellence and cosponsored an innovative bipartisan measure to encourage students specializing in vision care and rehabilitation to work in the VA. As president, he will expand the number of these centers of excellence and invest in specialty care.

**Care for Women Veterans:** There are 1.7 million women veterans, a number that is increasing every day. In Puerto Rico, 1,500 female veterans access the San Juan VA. Approximately 170 young female veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are currently seeking treatment. Barack Obama has introduced legislation to force the Pentagon and VA to better track the newest generation of veterans – including the number of women veterans – so that the VA can better plan their care. Obama also introduced legislation to fight homelessness among veterans, with a special focus on treating women who may have been victims of sexual trauma. As president, Obama will fight to ensure that women can get the care they deserve at the VA.

## **HONOR VETERANS**

**Combat Homelessness among Our Nation's Veterans:** On any given night, more than 200,000 veterans are homeless. More than 20 percent of America's homeless are veterans. However, the VA's homeless services reach only a quarter of this population. Barack Obama has been a leader in the fight to end homelessness among our nation's veterans. As a senator, Obama successfully passed legislation to expand services for homeless veterans. As president, he will establish a national "zero tolerance" policy for veterans falling into homelessness. Obama will improve existing services; expand proven homeless veteran housing vouchers to assist those already on the streets; and launch an innovative supportive services-housing program to prevent at-risk veterans and veteran families from falling into homelessness in the first place.

**Fight Veterans Employment Discrimination:** The current process of assisting reservists with employment discrimination complaints is disjointed, and managed by multiple federal agencies. Between 2004 and 2006 alone, over 16,000 complaints were filed under the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) – although a Defense Department survey showed that less than 30 percent of Guard members and reservists with USERRA problems ever sought assistance. A discrimination complaint can take months to investigate and resolve, potentially leaving veterans vulnerable and stuck between jobs. Given the growing number of reservists demobilizing and seeking reemployment, we must make a long-term investment in improving the timeliness and quality of resolving these cases. As president, Barack Obama will invest additional resources into enforcement and investigation in order to crack down on employers who are not following the letter and spirit of the law. He will also require the Pentagon, Labor and Justice Departments to work together more closely to ensure the rights of our troops are being protected.

## **END THE WAR IN IRAQ RESPONSIBLY**

**Bring the War in Iraq to a Responsible End:** In 2002, Obama had the judgment and the courage to oppose the war in Iraq, saying it would lead to “an occupation of undetermined length, with undetermined costs and undetermined consequences.” Puerto Ricans have participated in all U.S. wars since 1917, and 35 Puerto Ricans, not including those who live in the 50 states, have given the last full measure of devotion to the U.S. in Iraq. On a per capita basis, Puerto Rico has sent more active-duty forces to Iraq and Afghanistan than all U.S. states except Nevada. Today, Obama has a plan to immediately begin pulling out troops engaged in combat operations at a pace of one or two brigades every month, to be completed in 16 months. He would call for a new constitutional convention in Iraq, convened with the United Nations, which would not adjourn until Iraq’s leaders reach a new accord on reconciliation. He would use presidential leadership to surge our diplomacy with all of the nations of the region on behalf of a new regional security compact. And he would take immediate steps to confront the humanitarian disaster in Iraq.