



FULFILLING A SACRED TRUST WITH OUR VETERANS

"Keeping faith with those who serve must always be a core American value and a cornerstone of American patriotism. Because America's commitment to its servicemen and women begins at enlistment, and it must never end."

[Speech in Kansas City, MO, 8/21/07]

Texas is home to 1.7 million brave veterans of our armed services.¹ 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.

As president, Obama will ensure we honor the sacred trust to care for our nation'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.

BARACK OBAMA'S RECORD OF LEADERSHIP ON VETERANS' ISSUES

As a member of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Barack Obama has fought tirelessly for veterans. Among his many efforts to support our veterans are:

- **Support for Wounded Warriors:** Obama passed legislation in the U.S. Senate to improve care and slash red tape for our returning wounded warriors and their families who face deplorable conditions at places like Walter Reed Army Medical Center. The Senate also passed legislation based on other Obama proposals, including measures to reform the disability review process, strengthen mental health care support, and add needed healthcare benefits for family members caring for loved ones.
- **Help for Homeless Veterans:** Obama passed laws to help homeless veterans, including measures that will provide veterans with affordable housing options, expanded access to mental health and addition counseling and job training.
- **Protecting Servicemembers with Psychological Injuries:** Obama led a bipartisan effort in the Senate to try to halt the military's unfair practice of discharging service members for having a service-connected psychological injury.
- **Fighting for Illinois' Veterans:** Obama fought for fair treatment of Illinois veterans' claims after reviewing reports that Illinois veterans received less than other veterans across the country. As a result of his efforts, the VA opened an investigation into the matter, agreed to hire more disability claims specialists for the

Chicago regional office, and agreed to re-examine the claims of Illinois veterans who felt they had been treated unfairly.

- **Ensuring Free Calls and Meals for Wounded Soldiers:** Obama passed an amendment to give recovering service members free meals and free telephone calls at military hospitals. Previously, service members recovering in a military hospital for more than 90 days were required to pay for their own meals.
- **Protecting Veterans' Benefits:** Obama passed legislation to stop a VA review of closed PTSD cases that could have led to a reduction in veterans' benefits.
- **Requiring Screening for TBI:** Obama passed an amendment to ensure that all service members returning from Iraq are properly screened for Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). TBI is considered a signature injury of the Iraq war.
- **Supporting National Guard and Reservists:** Obama introduced legislation to direct the VA and Pentagon to fix disjointed records systems and improve outreach to members of the National Guard and Reserves.

IMPROVE THE TRANSITION TO CIVILIAN LIFE

Ensure a Seamless Transition: As president, Obama will demand that the military and the VA coordinate to provide a truly seamless transition for service members from active duty to civilian life. Obama's plan will be modeled in part on legislation he introduced to require that each service member receive his or her medical and service records electronically upon discharge and that the military and VA enhance their outreach to separating members of the National Guard and Reserves, who often receive fewer benefits than their active-duty counterparts. Given the amount of time required for a service member to adjust to civilian life, Obama would also extend the window for new veterans to enroll in the VA from two to five years. Finally, Obama administration appointees to the DOD and VA would place the veteran—rather than bureaucratic turf concerns—at the center of all care and recovery plans.

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. 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: Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) is a signature injury of the Iraq war. The concussions from improvised explosive devices and explosively formed penetrators can cause mood changes, memory loss, convulsions, and loss of coordination. Barack Obama was an original cosponsor of legislation to improve care for TBI. As president, Obama will establish standards of care for TBI treatment, require pre- and post-deployment screenings and improve case management so that servicemembers get the best possible care.

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.

REFORM THE VETERANS ADMINISTRATION

Pass On-Time VA Budgets: Every year since the war in Iraq began Congress and the president have failed to enact a VA funding bill before the start of the fiscal year. This delays hiring decisions and adds uncertainty to an already overstretched VA struggling to prioritize scarce resources. As president, Obama will meet early in the budgeting process each year with congressional leaders and the nation's leading Veterans' Service Organizations (VSOs) to ensure the VA budget is always given "must-pass" status.

Allow All Veterans Back into the VA: When troops serve, they are not divided by income classes or priority groups. Yet, today the VA is picking and choosing which veterans to serve. Barack Obama is committed to ending the unfair ban on healthcare enrollment of certain groups of veterans, including "Priority 8" veterans who often earn modest incomes. He has voted to end this unfair policy, which has resulted in the VA turning away nearly one million veterans since 2003. As president, one of Barack Obama's first acts will be signing an executive order reversing this ban.

Restore Competence to VA Planning: Barack Obama will establish a world-class VA Actuary and Planning Division that would break down bureaucratic barriers between the VA's health and benefits administration and war planners in the Pentagon to anticipate the needs of our veterans. Obama believes that, in addition to concrete, regularly updated short-term plans and budgets for our veterans, the country should always anticipate the long-term needs of these heroes over their lifetimes. An Obama administration would be honest and transparent by clearly and regularly naming the true needs and costs of properly caring for those who have worn the uniform.

¹ Department of Veterans Affairs, 09/30/2007, <http://www1.va.gov/vetdata/docs/11.xls>