



## 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 Fargo, ND, 7/03/08]

## KEEPING PROMISES TO OUR NATION'S VETERANS & BUILDING A 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY VA

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. He has:

- Passed legislation to address the short- and long- term problems that led to inadequate care for injured service members at places like Walter Reed Army Medical Center.
- Passed legislation to strengthen programs that help homeless veterans.
- Fought for fair treatment of veterans' claims and forced the VA to take action to fix discrepancies.
- Passed an amendment to give recovering service members free meals at military hospitals.
- Helped stop a Department of Veterans Affairs review of closed PTSD cases that appeared designed to reduce veterans' benefits.
- Passed an amendment to ensure that all service members returning from Iraq are properly screened for traumatic brain injury.
- Mandated a major national research endeavor into the readjustment needs of returning service members, veterans and their families.

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.

### **CARE FOR THE WOUNDED**

**Care for Our Wounded Warriors:** The scandal at Walter Reed Army Medical Center brought to light showed 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

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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 healthcare 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. 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.

### **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.

### **FULLY FUND VA MEDICAL CARE**

**Fully Fund VA Medical Care:** As president, Barack Obama will fully fund the VA so it has all the resources it needs to serve the veterans who need it, when they need it. The current administration did not adequately plan for the true costs of this war. It has consistently underinvested in the health care for our heroic veterans. In 2005, a multi-billion dollar VA funding shortfall required Congress to step in and bail out the system. Currently veterans face delays and long wait-times in seeking VA health care appointments. Without assured funding year after year, our veterans are forced to make do with the VA they have rather than the VA they deserve.

**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.

### **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. 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. servicemembers 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.

**Expand Vet Centers:** Vet Centers are often the first line of defense for veterans to get help in their communities by offering counseling for vets and their families. They provide counseling for mental health care, sexual trauma and substance abuse. They also provide vocational and employment assistance, VA claims and benefits information, help for homeless veterans, social service and health care referrals. Barack Obama will expand and strengthen Vet Centers.

### **FIX THE VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION**

**Reduce the Claims Backlog:** There are currently over 400,000 claims pending within the Veterans Benefits Administration, and over 800,000 claims receipts are expected in 2008 alone. VA error rates have also grown

unacceptably high: over 100,000 cases each year contain significant errors. In the Senate, Barack Obama has voted to increase funding to hire needed additional claims staff. As president, Obama will hire additional claims workers and convene our nation's leading veterans groups, employees and managers to develop an updated training and management model that will ensure that VA benefit decisions are rated fairly and consistently, and stem from adequate training and accountability for each claims adjudicator.

**Building an Electronic VBA:** Currently, the case files for a veteran seeking compensation are literally stacked on the desks of over-burdened benefits caseworkers. Veterans often have to fill out the same form multiple times, and the files confronting case workers can add delays, confusion and errors to an already lengthy process. In the Senate, Barack Obama introduced legislation that would require each service member to receive an individual set of electronic health and service records upon discharge to ease the transition to the VA. As president, Obama will transform the paper benefit claims process to an electronic system that will be interoperable with the VA's health network as well as military records. This will reduce error rates, improve timeliness, and enhance the overall quality of the claims decisions.

### **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.

**Honor Fallen Heroes:** 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.

### **REBUILD AND REPAIR THE MILITARY**

**Rebuild and Repair the Military:** Barack Obama supports plans to increase the size of the Army by 65,000 troops and the Marines by 27,000 troops. Increasing our end strength will allow units to retrain and re-equip properly between deployments and decrease the strain on military families. Barack Obama also will invest in an equipment reset for the military, including the National Guard, which has seen its readiness for homeland security missions decrease significantly.

**Transform the Military to Meet 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Threats:** Barack Obama will ensure the United States armed forces maintain their technological edge, but will also invest in our warfighters to ensure they have the skills and training to fight and win the 21<sup>st</sup> century's complicated conflicts. That includes counterinsurgency and intelligence expertise as well as language skills and cultural literacy. Obama supports incentives such as foreign language proficiency pay for high-demand languages.

**Fully Equip Our Troops:** As president, Obama will ensure that each service member has the essential equipment they need before deploying. Military families have shared stories of purchasing life-saving equipment on their own before troops deploy to combat. If a great nation sends its citizens into harm's way, it has a moral obligation to fully equip them. In the Senate, Barack Obama has voted to increase the supply of live-or-die equipment in Iraq and Afghanistan, such as Mine Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicles (MRAPs).