



BARACK OBAMA: HONORING AMERICA'S VETERANS

"In America, we must never forget how lucky we are to have so many men and women who believe – who are willing to put aside their own pursuit of happiness, to subordinate their own sense of survival, for something bigger – something greater...And so it's this sense of obligation – of responsibility to one's fellow American – that we must honor when our veterans return and need our care and support."

[Speech in Springfield, Illinois, 6/17/2005]

BARACK OBAMA'S COMMITMENT TO AMERICA'S VETERANS

Barack Obama's grandfather served in Europe during World War II, and when he came home, it was the education and opportunity offered by the GI Bill that allowed his family to build their own American dream. As a member of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Obama is committed to helping the heroes who defend our nation today and the veterans who fought in wars past. Obama has worked in a bipartisan way to honor our commitment to America's veterans and give them the resources they deserve.

Create a 21st Century VA: There are more than 26 million veterans in America. But the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) that was built to care for World War II veterans is not ready to handle the influx of veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan. Barack Obama is committed to creating a VA that provides sufficient support to today's veteran population. Obama will ensure the Department of Defense works closely with the Department of Veterans Affairs, to help new veterans transition from active duty to civilian life. He will develop a 21st-century VA that anticipates the needs of today's veterans and provides them with the health care, benefits and support they have earned.

Treat our Injured Troops with Respect: Following reports of poor living conditions and bureaucratic neglect at Walter Reed Army Medical Hospital, Barack Obama introduced the Dignity for Wounded Warriors Act with Senator Claire McCaskill (D-MO). The bill improves the condition of troop housing, streamlines the process for seeking care, provides greater information to recovering servicemembers, requires the hiring of more caseworkers, and provides more support to family members who care for injured troops.

Fund Veterans' Health Care: Barack Obama championed legislation in 2005 that led to a \$1.5 billion increase in veterans' medical care and supported additional measures that would have provided even more funding for veterans' services. In January 2007, Obama reintroduced the Lane Evans Veterans Health and Benefits Improvement Act to improve the VA's planning process and to avoid budget shortfalls in the future. The bill requires the VA and the Department of Defense to work together and share data so that VA budget analysts can plan for the troops returning home and entering the VA system.

Ease the Transition of New Veterans into Civilian Life: In September 2006, Barack Obama introduced legislation that would help veterans transition from the Pentagon health system to the VA system by extending the window in which new veterans can get mental health care from two years to five years; requiring the VA and the Department of Defense to work together to track new veterans entering the VA for better budget

planning; monitoring of emerging health trends; and giving every new veteran an electronic copy of their medical and service records to help them apply for VA services and benefits. This legislation would also improve transition services for members of the National Guard and Reserves.

Fight for Disability Benefits: Following reports that veterans in Illinois were receiving less in disability benefits than those nearly anywhere else in the country, Barack Obama led efforts to correct the reasons for those disparities. As a result of his efforts, 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. Obama worked with Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL) to force the VA to notify veterans in Illinois and other states traditionally underserved about their right to seek a review of their past claims. The resulting outreach led to significant numbers of Illinois veterans getting the benefits they deserve.

Shelter and Rehabilitate Homeless Veterans: The VA estimates that one-in-three homeless adult males is a veteran. Some 400,000 vets experience homelessness over the course of the year. Barack Obama authored legislation to extend and expand critically important programs to stop homelessness among American veterans. Working with Senators Daniel Akaka (D-HI) and Larry Craig (R-ID), he passed legislation to provide comprehensive services and affordable housing options to veterans through the Department of Veterans Affairs, Department of Housing and Urban Development and community organizations. Obama reintroduced his Homes for Heroes Act in March 2007, which would greatly increase access to long-term, affordable housing for veterans by devoting \$225 million to purchase, build or rehabilitate homes and apartments for veterans. The legislation would also greatly expand successful existing veteran's rental assistance programs and create a Special Assistant for Veterans Affairs within the Department of Housing and Urban Development to coordinate services to homeless veterans.

Care for Women Veterans: There are 1.7 million women veterans, a number that is increasing every day. 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.

Treat Wounded Veterans with Respect: Barack Obama passed a law to provide free food services to wounded service members receiving physical therapy or rehabilitation at military hospitals. Previously, service members recovering in a military hospital for more than 90 days were required to pay for their own meals.

Treat Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI): In 2005, the VA announced it would contact veterans with severe PTSD and ask them to prove that they deserved their disability payments. This review of disability claims was highly disruptive to veterans still suffering serious health effects from their military service. Barack Obama fought this review and along with Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL), passed legislation to limit it and helped publicly pressure the agency to finally abandon the effort in November of 2005. Obama also worked with Senator Bill Frist (R-TN) to pass an amendment ensuring that all service members returning from Iraq are properly screened for Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). TBI is being called the signature injury of the Iraq war. The blast from improvised explosive devices can jar the brain, causing bruising or permanent damage. Concussions can have huge health effects including slowed thinking, headaches, memory loss, sleep disturbance, attention and concentration deficits, and irritability. In 2007, Obama joined Durbin to introduce legislation to improve the care and treatment of veterans and service members suffering from TBI. The bill would provide individualized services, require routine brain injury screening tests for military personnel, increase TBI patient benefits, improve case oversight and expand TBI research at the Defense Department and the VA.