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House of Representatives

ENSURING THE WELL-BEING OF VETERANS

HON. BOB FILNER
OF CALIFORNIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

MR. FILNER: Mr. Speaker and colleagues, I rise today to urge support for four bills that I have introduced to address several needs of our veterans and to ensure their well-being.

The first bill (H.R. 1924) deals with education benefits. Last year, one very important piece of the Fiscal Year 2003 National Defense Authorization Act that Congress passed was a provision that extends the time limit for members of the Selected Reserve to use their Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB) education benefits from 10 years to 14 years. Prior to the passage of this law, these MGIB participants had only 10 years from their release from military service to use these earned education benefits.

Many times, veterans with families, work commitments, and economic difficulties are unable to fulfill all their requirements to receive a degree or certification within this 10 year period. In passing last year's Defense Authorization Act, Congress recognized this difficulty for members of the Selected Reserve. Also recognizing that 10 years may not be long enough for certain individuals, the VA Secretary has limited discretion to grant time extensions to those who are unable to use their benefits due to mental or physical handicaps.

It is clear that life in 2003 can make it difficult to finish an education in the allotted time frame. I believe it is time to extend the time period for all the participants of the MGIB. Therefore, I have introduced H.R. 1924, "The Montgomery GI Bill Flexibility Act," which will allow all participants up to 14 years to complete their education. This bill will ensure that more of our veterans are able to avail themselves of the educational opportunity that the MGIB affords them--the educational opportunity that they earned.

A second bill, H.R. 1920, "Let U.S. Veterans Rebuild Iraq Act," does just what the title says. It would guarantee jobs to veterans with companies that are awarded government contracts to rebuild Iraq. We have all rallied to support our troops as they waged Operation: Iraqi Freedom. But often, after the troops come home, our veterans are not treated with the respect that they deserve. It is most important to ensure that there are jobs for our nation's veterans, both new veterans and older. We are still fighting homelessness among veterans, a national disgrace. One way to better the lives of many veterans is to include them in the job of rebuilding Iraq. They fought for freedom for Iraq. Let's get them involved with helping to secure the future for Iraq.

My third bill, H.R. 1347, "The Former Prisoners of War Equitable Dental Benefits Act," is legislation that I introduced in the 107th Congress and that passed the House of Representatives, but not the Senate. This bill is supported by the Department of Veterans Affairs. It would eliminate the "time of internment" requirement for former prisoners-of-war (POWs) in order to be eligible for outpatient dental care benefits at the VA.

No one can deny that former POWs have sacrificed greatly in defense of their country. Unfortunately, their sacrifices continue. Reports have shown that POWs are at higher risk for a number of disabling conditions associated with exposure to infectious disease, inclement weather, and malnutrition.

Currently, the law states that eligibility for outpatient dental care benefits only applies to former POWs with 90 days or more of internment. As you can imagine, this time requirement has been difficult for the VA to administer and to justify to the veterans seeking dental care. Former POWs are often confused about this time requirement. Who

could say that our POWs in Iraq did not suffer because they were not imprisoned for 90 days? H.R. 1347 eliminates the arbitrary distinction between former POWs who have all paid dearly for their service.

Fourthly, I have learned that VA doctors are not allowed to prescribe more than a 1 month prescription for controlled drugs, such as pain killers used for chronic conditions. But many veterans who have these prescriptions have been treated with the same medications for years and show no signs of abuse. H.R. 1921, the "Continuity of Care for Veterans with Chronic Conditions Act," would allow VA doctors to write a three-month prescription for these veterans who demonstrate no sign of abuse of their medication. This bill would make it more convenient for sick veterans to get their medication and would ensure that no lag time exists when veterans are without their medication.

Education, jobs, benefits, and prescriptions for our nation's veterans. I urge your support for this legislation!