

Rep. Lantos lambastes legislation

Bill would equalize reservists' pay with civilian salaries.

Dwana Simone Bain

Staff Writer

Published on Thursday, April 22, 2004

SAN MATEO -- Congressman Tom Lantos, D-San Mateo, San Francisco, called a bill passed Wednesday "sham legislation" and demanded more substantial financial relief for members of the Reserves and National Guard. He urged Congress to consider a bill that would close the pay gap faced by Reservists and National Guard members in active duty.

On Wednesday, House lawmakers passed H.R. 1779, the Guardsmen and Reservists Financial Relief Act. Lantos calls the new law -- passed 415-0 -- "absolute height of hypocrisy" which offers "the tiniest of tiny benefits."

The new law would amend the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 to allow penalty-free withdrawals from retirement plans during the period that a military reservist or national guardsman is on active duty for an extended period. Reserve and National Guard troops often take a paycut and lose their civilian salaries while in the service. Employers are not required to compensate for lost wages or continue providing benefits.

H.R. 1779 does not go far enough, Lantos said. "Instead of considering serious and substantive democratic proposals to help those who risk their lives for all Americans, the leadership continues to adopt grandly titled legislation which does little or nothing," Lantos said. "It is time to stop playing with sham legislation like this bill."

Lantos pushed Wednesday for the passage of H.R. 1345, the Equity for Reservists Pay Act, a bipartisan bill he authored and introduced in March 2003.

"Congressman Lantos feels it's an injustice to impose financial hardship on people who are already making substantial sacrifices in the name of national interest," said Lantos' Communications Director Lynn Weil. "He believes that America's citizen soldiers deserve better treatment."

The bill would ensure that Reservists and Guard members who work as civilians for the federal government would continue to earn the equivalent of their civilian salaries. More reservists work for the federal government than for any other employer. About 120,000 National Guard and Reserve members are federal employees.

The bill would offer state and local governments various incentives to follow suit for their workers on active duty.