

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-0907

August 3, 2006

Veterans and Military Retirees
Florida's Seventh Congressional District

Dear Friends:

As the summer session of Congress concludes, I wanted to provide an update on veterans-related legislation that may be of interest to you.

Improving health care services for our veterans and seniors continues to be one of my top priorities. After years of debate, federal authorization has finally been secured for a new veterans hospital in Central Florida.

Unfortunately for many years veterans in the Central Florida region have had inadequate access to VA medical resources. My father died in a crowded veterans hospital, and I remember taking my late uncle from Winter Park to the Tampa VA Hospital. Many veterans are forced to travel to distant VA facilities to receive specialized care and rehabilitation treatment services. The VA completed a nationwide study of its current facilities and recognized Central Florida as the highest populated area in the nation without a full-service veterans hospital. In its final report, the VA recommended that a new hospital be built in Orlando to serve the veterans of the community. The U.S. House Veterans' Affairs Committee has now authorized \$377 million for the project.

Over the past several years I have worked in Congress to secure federal funds for the planning and design phase. The VA has selected an architectural and design firm, and I am pleased that work is underway to build the long overdue hospital without further delay.

It was my honor to participate in the opening of the William V. Chappell, Jr. Veterans Outpatient Clinic's expanded facilities that will provide additional space to accommodate our growing veterans population in Volusia and Flagler Counties. I

recently visited our St. Johns County Veterans Outpatient Clinic that has improved its capacity. The Council on Aging is now providing expanded bus service from the St. Augustine VA clinic to the Veterans Hospital in Gainesville.

Federal funding for veterans programs will be increased for the new fiscal year which begins October 1st. That will help provide comprehensive health care services to veterans on a timely and convenient manner. Increasing veterans medical care funding is important, particularly as our veterans population ages. Over the last 10 years we have increased the budget for VA medical care by 90%. Just since 2005, we have expanded funding from \$27.8 billion to \$32.3 billion, an increase of 16%. For 2007, the VA plans to spend nearly \$3 billion for mental health care. For new veterans who are returning from duty related to our operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, we have increased funding for their care by 6.3%. Five million veterans will receive health care services this year.

In the past two years, the House has increased the veterans budget by 18%. The total VA budget has increased from approximately \$66 billion in Fiscal Year 2005 to approximately \$78 billion for next year. In the last decade we have been able to increase the VA budget by 94%. This action has enabled the VA to care for a record number of high-priority patients - those veterans who are counting on us the most.

In Washington, I was pleased to join with veterans leaders and VA Secretary Jim Nicholson at the 75th anniversary celebration of the founding of the VA that was held in the U.S. Capitol.

We have worked for several years now to help improve veterans employment opportunities. In 1998, Congress passed legislation I authored, the Veterans Employment Opportunities Act, to provide veterans and military retirees with additional recognition in obtaining federal employment. This bill sought to provide veterans with special hiring and job retention consideration based on their service to our nation in the armed forces. Enacted into law, the measure has been called the most significant improvement in veterans' preference in 50 years. Congress has also passed measures to improve the ability of veterans and disabled veterans businesses to compete for federal contracts.

The House passed the Veterans Small Business and Memorial Affairs Act of 2006 in July. This measure authorizes education, training, employment and memorial benefits for America's veterans. Importantly, the bill also gives direct priority to veteran-owned businesses for contracts with the VA and creates a new program to help veterans obtain jobs in the private sector. Hopefully the Senate will act to approve the bill in September.

Knowing that the concurrent receipt benefit is important to our veterans, we have worked for a number of years to ensure that all of our disabled military retirees who are entitled to disability compensation are not penalized by having their retirement pay reduced. In 2004, Congress approved a significant change in law and provided \$22 billion to allow military retirees with a 100% disability rating to receive full retirement and disability payments. Congress has also authorized a concurrent receipt program for military retirees with a disability rating of 50% or higher to be phased in over 10 years. While some progress has been made to end this unfair offset, we will continue working to correct this inequity and grant full concurrent receipt to all disabled veterans.

Veterans life insurance programs have also improved with enactment last September of a new law increasing the maximum coverage for Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance (SGLI) and Veterans' Group Life Insurance (VGLI) to \$400,000.

In the area of education, we have boosted GI Bill benefits 59% since 2001. Legislation enacted that year raised the lifetime benefit for qualified veterans from \$23,400 to \$37,224, giving veterans more opportunities to pursue a higher education. We are now working to expand and modernize the GI Bill to provide educational assistance to America's reserve and National Guard units, as well as returning service members.

Progress is being made to reduce homelessness among veterans and to increase home ownership opportunities. Since 2001, veterans homelessness has been reduced from 250,000 to 192,000, which unfortunately is still unacceptable. Of our local homeless population, nearly 25% are veterans. Much remains to be done in the area of affordable housing, mental health and substance abuse programs for veterans.

VA home loan guarantees have nearly doubled since 2001. In 2004, Congress increased the maximum VA home loan guarantee to \$417,000 – an increase of more than 70 percent from the level that prevailed in 2001. Through our action, more veterans now have opportunities to own their own homes. We have also passed in the House the Veterans Housing Opportunity and Benefits Improvements Act, which will offer disabled veterans assistance to modify the homes of family members helping them, to better accommodate their injuries.

This past year we have continued the largest expansion of the national cemetery system since the Civil War. Funding has been approved to purchase land for six new national cemeteries, and \$32 million has been provided for new state cemetery grants. Two new cemeteries will be located in Florida. Congress passed legislation in 2004 with

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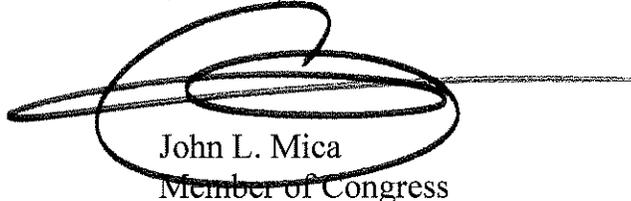
my support to construct one of the new VA National Cemeteries for our veterans in Northeast Florida. The National Cemetery Expansion Act, which I cosponsored and has been signed into law by President Bush (P.L. 108-109), directs the VA to establish a new cemetery in Northeast Florida by 2007. To this end, the VA has narrowed its selection process to two sites located near the Jacksonville International Airport. A final decision is anticipated in the near future, and construction is expected to be completed in 2008.

Finally, I along with many other Americans have been offended by reports of demonstrations at military funerals held at National Cemeteries. While we can never place a value on the service of those who pay the ultimate price in defense of our freedom, we should protect the rights of their family members and loved ones to grieve and honor their fallen with respect and privacy. I supported and voted for the Respect for America's Fallen Heroes Act to prohibit such demonstrations, and that measure is now law.

Serious issues remain regarding the needs of our overextended reserve forces and their families. Hopefully these can be addressed in the months ahead. As we proceed into the final months of the year, please let me know if I can be of further assistance on these or any other veterans issues of concern to you. Be assured, I will continue working to ensure we keep our commitment to those who serve and sacrifice for our country.

With my regards and best wishes, I remain

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several overlapping loops and a horizontal line extending to the right. The signature is positioned above the printed name and title.

John L. Mica
Member of Congress