

News from U.S. Rep. John Spratt (D-SC)
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Spratt Backs 4 Veterans' Bills

WASHINGTON – U.S. Rep. John Spratt (D-SC) joined a majority of his House colleagues on Monday in passing four bills to benefit veterans.

“These bills would help veterans in several areas, including health care and employment, as well as provide a cost-of-living adjustment,” said Spratt. “I was proud to vote for each bill.”

Spratt, a senior member of the House Armed Services Committee, provided the following summary of the legislation passed by the House.

H.R. 4514, Veterans' Major Medical Facilities Construction Act – This bill authorizes nearly \$3 million in Fiscal Year 2003 for the lease of a satellite clinic in Charlotte, N.C.

The bill also authorizes projects to improve, renovate, and update patient care facilities at certain Veterans' Affairs (VA) medical centers.

In addition, the bill establishes criteria for selection of minor construction projects. These criteria would provide a higher priority for seismic protection and fire safety, as well as improvements to VA utility systems and ancillary patient care facilities; accommodations for persons with disabilities; blind rehabilitation centers; programs for seriously mentally ill patients; rehabilitation programs for substance abuse; physical medicine and rehabilitation activities; long-term care; amputee care; spinal cord injury centers; traumatic brain injury programs; women's health programs; and facilities for hospice and palliative care.

H.R. 4015, Jobs for Veterans Act – This bill authorizes funds for a new performance incentive awards program to encourage states to improve their employment, training, and placement programs for veterans. This incentive program would provide these awards to the states that had the best record in helping veterans find work. It would also provide awards to states that made significant progress in this area, even if they were not among the highest performers. The awards would take the form of new contracts for veterans employment programs.

The bill authorizes \$10 million in FY 2004, \$25 million in FY 2005, \$50 million in FY 2006, \$75 million in FY 2007, \$100 million in FY 2008, and such sums as may in necessary in FY 2009 and succeeding years.

The bill also authorizes \$3 million in each of fiscal years 2003 through 2005 for a "National Hire Veterans Committee" to raise employer awareness of veterans' skills and the benefits of hiring veterans and disabled veterans. It authorizes

\$1 million for a Labor Department study of the economic benefit to the United States attributable to providing employment and training services to veterans.

The bill also raises the threshold amount from \$25,000 to \$100,000 for contracts under which a contractor must comply with veterans employment provisions.

H.R. 4085, Veterans' Compensation COLA -- This bill provides an annual cost-of-living increase for veterans' benefits, and expands certain benefits for veterans and their survivors.

The bill provides a cost of living increase, effective December 1, for disability compensation for veterans with service-connected disabilities, and dependency and indemnity compensation for survivors of certain service-connected disabled veterans. Under the measure, the percentage amount would be equal to the increase for benefits provided under the Social Security Act, which is calculated based upon changes in the consumer price index. (The committee estimates that the increase will be 2.3%.)

The measure provides that the surviving spouse of a veteran who remarries after the age of 65 would not lose his or her dependency and indemnity compensation payments, eligibility for medical care, or education and housing loan benefits. Survivors who remarried after age 65 prior to enactment of this measure could reapply for benefits within the first year of enactment.

The bill also provides that through FY 2005, the home loan fees charged to qualifying members of the Selected Reserve would be equal to fees charged to active duty veterans. (Currently, reservists pay a 0.75% higher funding fee than other eligible veterans.)

The measure increases coverage under the Veterans' Mortgage Life Insurance -- which covers veterans' home mortgages in the event of death -- from \$90,000 to \$150,000. Under the measure, veterans over age 70 could maintain coverage under this program, which currently is cancelled at age 70.

Finally, the measure increases funding for state approving agencies (SAAs) which review and evaluate education programs for use by veterans under the Montgomery GI Bill and other veterans' education assistance programs. Under the measure, funding would be increased from \$14 million to \$18 million each year for FY 2003 through FY 2005.

H. Con. Res. 314, Recognizing and Supporting American Veterans -- This bill recognizes the American Veterans of World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War (AMVETS) members for their service to the United States, and supports AMVETS National Charter Day.

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