

News from Congressman Jim Oberstar



Spring 2002

Veterans Update

Dear Friend:

“The only excuse for war is that we may live in peace unharmed.”

Although Cicero, the Roman statesman and author who lived from 104-43 B.C., wrote those words more than two thousand years ago, the sentiment rings true today. The war on terrorism, launched following the tragic events of September 11th, is a poignant reminder of how much our nation needs—and appreciates—the courageous service of the men and women in our Armed Forces.

We, as a nation, should recommit ourselves to the ideals which have emerged in the days since September 11th: individual responsibility, mutual respect and cooperation, intelligent and moral leadership, and sheer courage. We should all remember that in the past two centuries, no citizens have paid a higher price for America than our veterans. We are truly grateful for the selfless sacrifices those serving in the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, the Marine Corps and the Coast Guard make to protect our democratic way of life and the freedom that we enjoy.

In this new and difficult era, the nation must ensure that our military personnel and their exemplary service will be remembered and honored. This is an appropriate time to update you on legislation important to veterans and their families. Rest assured that I will continue working to ensure that America's heroes receive the support and services which the nation has promised and which they deserve.

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Sincerely,

James L. Oberstar, M.C.

Veterans Deserve Affordable Health Care

Prescription Drugs

In 1999, the federal government gave the Veterans Administration (VA) authority, in Section 201 of P.L. 106-117, to set co-payment levels for outpatient care and medications. Over the past year, the VA has been working on a new co-payment system that will lower co-payments for outpatient visits, but significantly increase co-payments for medications received from VA hospitals. The Bush Administration decided earlier this year to increase the cost of prescription drugs by 250%.

Specifically, the new co-payment plan proposed by the Bush Administration increases the cost of medications for veterans from \$2 to \$7 per prescription (or 250%). Many veterans take 5-7 prescriptions a month. With this change, a veteran who already pays \$168 a year for seven prescriptions will be forced to pay \$588.

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While the nation is united in favor of increased investment in defense and homeland security, the health care of those who have already served in the nation's armed services should not be jeopardized. Congressman Oberstar supports affordable prescription drugs for military retirees, and he has urged the Administration to rescind the recent increase.

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Concurrent Payments

Additionally, the House of Representatives passed its version of the Fiscal Year 2002 National Defense Authorization Act (H.R. 2586) on September 25, 2001. That bill included language authorizing the VA to pay eligible veterans both their service-connected disability compensation and their full military retired pay, if two subsequent events occurred: (1) the President requested authorizing legislation to allow concurrent payment of VA disability compensation and military retired pay; and (2) Congress enacted legislation to explicitly offset the costs of this concurrent payment.

The second provision is a requirement, because military retired pay is considered "mandatory," or entitlement spending. Under congressional budget rules, increases



If you would like to share your concerns with President Bush about the need for concurrent payment, you can contact the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 810 Vermont Avenue N.W., Washington, D.C. 20420.

Congressman Oberstar met with veterans at VFW Post #137 to discuss homeland security and veterans programs, such as health care and pensions.



in spending for one entitlement program must be offset by reductions in spending for other entitlement programs. The Retired Pay Restoration Act of 2001 (H.R. 303), which was introduced on January 30, 2001, would permit retired members of the Armed Forces who have a disability to receive both military retired pay (by reason of their years of military service) and disability compensation from the VA (for their service-connected disability). Congressman Oberstar is a proud cosponsor of H.R. 303, which is currently under consideration by the House Veterans Affairs' Committee and the House Armed Services Committee. ★



Congressman Oberstar has an office near you!

If you have questions about this or any other issue, call us or visit our website at www.house.gov/oberstar/

Duluth (Southern Aitkin, Carlton, Lake, Southern St. Louis) 218-727-7474

Elk River (Benton, Mille Lacs, Sherburne) 763-241-0188

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North Branch (Chisago, Isanti, Kanabec, Pine) 651-277-1234

Washington, DC (Serving all of Minnesota's Eighth Congressional District) 202-225-6211

Giving Veterans the Respect They Deserve

In 2001, Congress sent to the President's desk a number of notable bills, which were signed into law, that will assist veterans and their families. These measures include:

Veterans' Benefits Act (H.R. 2540)

This bill provides a 2.6% cost-of-living increase (COLA) for service-disabled veterans, extends the time limit for Vietnam veterans seeking compensation for respiratory cancers, and makes Gulf War veterans with multiple symptoms illnesses eligible for compensation.

Homeless Veterans Comprehensive Assistance Act (H.R. 2716)

This bill authorizes approximately \$1 billion over five years for programs to assist homeless veterans. It requires the VA to provide veterans access to mental health services, including substance abuse treatment.

Veterans Education and Benefits Expansion Act (H.R. 1291)

The bill increases veterans educational benefits by 51%, extends educational benefits to troops called to duty since the September 11th attacks, expands the list of illnesses for which Persian Gulf War veterans can get benefits, and expands some veterans' housing programs.

Department of Veterans Affairs Health Care Programs Enhancement Act (H.R. 3447)

This bill includes several veterans health care provisions, including expanding nursing programs at VA hospitals.

VA/HUD Appropriations Bill (H.R. 2620)

This bill appropriates \$51.1 billion for VA programs and benefits—\$3.2 billion (7%) more than Fiscal Year 2001 funding, but \$219 million less than the House bill. The measure increases funding for VA medical care (by 5%), veterans' service-connected compensation benefits and pensions (by 7%), readjustment benefits (by 8%), and medical and prosthetic research (by 6%).

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