



**Veterans Summit  
June 2, 2003**

**The Office of  
Congressman Dennis  
J. Kucinich**

## Congressman Kucinich's Work on Veterans Issues in the 108<sup>th</sup> Congress

### Kucinich Working to Restore Funding Cuts for Veterans Programs

The House Budget Resolution, based on the Administration's budget, reduced funding for veterans' health care and benefit programs by nearly \$25 billion. The actual spending impact of these cuts will be even greater. Over a ten-year period the budget resolution proposes a cut of almost \$9 billion in veterans' health care—an average of more than \$900 million less than the President has proposed per year. For other veterans' benefits, including cash payments to veterans disabled by military service, the Republican budget calls for a \$15 billion cut in spending from current levels during the next ten years. Ninety percent of the mandatory spending cuts is from cash payments to service disabled veterans, low-income wartime veterans and their survivors.

Specifically, these funding cuts and service cuts in the House Budget resolution include:

- No provision for additional service-connected disability benefits resulting from the war with Iraq.
- Retaining the ineligibility for new priority 8 veterans for VA health care services indefinitely,
- Requiring Priority 7 and 8 veterans to have an annual enrollment fee in addition to increased copayments for pharmaceutical drugs and primary care,
- Providing only veterans with highly rated service-connected disabilities (more than 70%) VA nursing home care,
- No additional funds available to implement the Homeless Veterans Comprehensive Assistance Act to work toward the goal of eliminating chronic homelessness in a decade.

In contrast, Congressman Kucinich crafted the Progressive Caucus/Black Caucus Alternative Budget. The Alternative Budget did not cut veterans programs and instead, provided increases for key priorities. *This budget for fiscal year 04 provided over \$3 billion above the Administration's budget for veterans' programs.* Most of the provisions affecting veterans programs were based directly on the Independent Budget, which is created by AMVETS, Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America, and Veterans of Foreign Wars.

### **Switch to Mandatory Health Care Dollars, not Discretionary**

Veterans health care funding is currently provided through the annual appropriations process on a discretionary basis, which means that the amount of money for veterans health care is subject to change every year. Congressman Kucinich believes that veterans health care funding should be provided in a mandatory spending account so funding is guaranteed every year. Last year, Cong. Kucinich was a cosponsor of H.R. 5250 to fund veterans health care with mandatory dollars, and will be a cosponsor of the bill when it is reintroduced by Rep. Evans this year.

### **Investigating Fraud at Military Health Facilities**

As Ranking Member of the National Security Subcommittee, Congressman Kucinich asked the Government Accounting Office (GAO) to investigate whether internal controls at military treatment facilities were effectively implemented. The investigation found very poor record keeping, potential instances of fraud with government credit cards, and wasteful spending. Congressman Kucinich has worked to broaden the investigation to find out how widespread the

problems are. GAO completed another report in April with recommendations to prevent fraud and inaccurate record keeping. For example, GAO suggests establishing automatic flags in patient record databases if a Social Security number is entered for a deceased person.

### **Veterans Prescription Drug Benefits Act**

Congressman Kucinich is a cosponsor of H.R. 1309, the “Veterans Prescription Drug Benefits Act of 2003” which authorizes the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to fill the prescription drug orders of private-sector providers for Medicare-eligible veterans.

This bill would offer the following benefits to America’s veterans:

- Allow Medicare-eligible veterans to fill prescriptions ordered by non-VA physicians at VA medical facilities
- Enable those higher income veterans (Priority 8) who were barred from enrolling in the VA health care system earlier this year to have access to subsidized prescription drug coverage from VA.
- Help address the problem wait times by eliminating queues that have developed as higher income veterans have flooded the system to seek inexpensive prescription drugs (Under current statute veterans must be examined by a VA physician prior to receiving VA prescription benefits even if they have a private primary care physician, resulting in duplicating of services and increase wait times).
- Allow our rural veterans to visit their local physicians for prescription orders, rather than drive several hours to a VA facility.
- Provide a new VA-funded benefit to Priority 1 veterans (highest level of service-connected disabilities).

While VA would administer the benefit, Medicare would fund the costs of the drug, including administrative, dispensing and mailing costs. Five major veterans’ service organizations (AMVETS, Blinded Veterans Association, Military Order of the Purple Heart, Paralyzed Veterans of America and Vietnam Veterans of America) have expressed support for the bill.

### **Veterans’ Education Benefits**

To keep pace with rising costs of higher education and provide quality readjustment benefits for our servicemembers and veterans, we must increase the education benefits provided under the Montgomery G.I. Bill (MGIB). According to recent reports the average monthly costs (tuition, fees and other expenses) of attending a four-year public institution equals approximately \$1,496 per month. The monthly education benefit provided under the MGIB is \$900 and will increase to \$985 in October of 2003; the current monthly benefit provided under the MGIB-SR for full-time study is \$276. The disparity between the ever increasing costs of higher education and veterans’ education benefits is apparent, and we must act now to close this divide. In order to increase veterans’ education benefits, Congressman Kucinich is a cosponsor of H.R. 1713, the Montgomery GI Bill Improvements Act of 2003.

### **Democratic Salute to Veterans and Servicemembers**

Congressman Kucinich supports the new Democratic initiative called the *Salute to Veterans and Servicemembers*, which has the support of major veterans service organizations. This is a

comprehensive package designed to address concurrent receipt, reduce claims delays, eliminate new copayments and improve benefits. The major provisions include:

- Authorize **concurrent receipt** of military retirement pay and VA compensation benefit.
- To **address claims delays**, the provisions would require payment of interim benefits of \$500 per month when a claim has not been decided within 180 days after the remand decision.
- Provide \$1 billion in increased funding to **reduce the time for veterans awaiting an appointment** for VA medical care and provide better access to care.
- Eliminate Administration proposal to increase the copayment for prescription drugs to \$15.00 per prescription and to charge annual enrollment fees of \$250.00 for veterans with incomes above certain thresholds.
- **Increase the education benefit** for reservists and index the reservist benefits to at least keep pace with the active duty Montgomery G.I. Bill.
- Maintain the **Survivor Benefit Plan** benefit at 55% of the retiree benefit instead of reducing it to 35% when the spouse turns 62.
- Offer a new benefit to pay a one-time \$1,000 benefit to those who served in imminent danger status in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom.
- Expand **outreach** to veterans by requiring an outreach plan to provide information concerning veterans' benefits and health care.

### **Kucinich Helps to Restore Community Voice Mail for Homeless Veterans**

In an on-going effort to provide oversight of how the VA is working for veterans in Northeast Ohio, Congressman Kucinich intervened when he learned that the VA was planning to opt out of the Northeast Ohio Coalition for the Homeless (NEOCH) Community Voice Mail program. The Community Voice Mail program has become a critical link in a homeless person's efforts to find housing, work, and other sources of help in their lives. Through the program, homeless persons may provide a telephone number to which their contacts may call and leave a message just as persons with permanent homes can be reached. Simply having a phone number removes some of the stigma a homeless person may feel in trying to maintain contact with others, including prospective employers, housing leads, agency contacts, as well as friends and family – an essential part of anyone's social and safety network. Although NEOCH had been in discussion with the VA to expand the program, a bureaucratic snafu almost resulted in the elimination of the VA's participation in Community Voice Mail. Because of Congressman Kucinich's intervention, the VA will continue and expand its participation in Community Voice Mail to provide that critical link for homeless veterans to remain in contact with their personal and professional networks.

### **Reinstating Medical Transportation Service for Disabled and Low Income Veterans**

Medical transportation benefits for disabled veterans was recently eliminated by the VA due to a VA policy change intended to save money. This policy outlined that unless a veteran was wheelchair or stretcher-bound, they would not qualify for this service. Over 300 disabled and low-income veterans—veterans who are barely ambulatory and have extreme difficulty in walking lost this vital service. Congressman Kucinich's District Staff met with administrators at

the VA, and administrators with the Veterans Service Commission (VSC) to find a solution to this significant problem. (The VSC, funded by the County, is mandated by Ohio law to provide free medical transportation to any Veteran in need of this service. )

At a second meeting held at Congressman Kucinich's District office in late April, Jim Fell, Executive Director of the Veterans Service Commission, announced a newly-developed, 2 phase plan that will provide free medical transportation services for disabled and/or low-income Veterans of this District. Linda Smith and Patti Gheen of the VA were also present at the meeting, and committed VA support of this plan. In addition, support was pledged from representatives from the Cuyahoga County Commissioner's office, who were also present at the meeting. Congressman Kucinich is hopeful that this newly-developed plan proposed by the VSC will be implemented soon, and that the VSC and VA will continue this partnership focused on providing this vitally important service for disabled veterans of Cuyahoga County.

### **Legislation that Congressman Kucinich has supported and the House has passed**

#### **H.R. 100, Servicemembers Civil Relief Act**

The Servicemembers Civil Relief Act, H.R. 100, passed the House on May 7, 2003. This bill would modernize the Soldiers and Sailors Civil Relief Act and would provide additional protections from civil liability when servicemembers are called to active duty.

#### **H.R. 1257, Selected Reserve Home Loan Equity Act**

The Selected Reserve Home Loan Equity Act, H.R. 1257 was passed by the House on May 22, 2003. This legislation recognizes that reservists are part of our Nation's "total force" who have earned the right to obtain a VA home loan on an equitable basis with other veterans. The bill would make the home loan program for reservists a permanent VA benefit. Reservists who now pay a higher funding fee than other servicemembers would pay fees equal to that of other veterans.

#### **H.R. 1683, Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2003**

The Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2003, H.R. 1683 passed the House on May 22, 2003. This bill would provide an increase in benefits paid to service-connected disabled veterans and their survivors effective in 2004. The amount of the increase will be known in mid-October when the consumer price index data is computed.

#### **H.R. 1911, VA/DOD Sharing**

The VA/DOD Sharing bill passed the House on May 21, 2003 with a 426 – 0 vote. This bill establishes an interagency committee to be known as the Department of Veterans Affairs-Department of Defense Joint Executive Committee to: (1) recommend to the Secretary of each department strategic direction for joint health-care resources coordination and sharing efforts between and within such departments; and (2) oversee implementation of those efforts.

### **Useful Veterans Websites**

1. House Veterans Affairs Committee – Democratic Homepage  
<http://veterans.house.gov/democratic/welcome.htm>

2. Federal Benefits for Veterans and Dependents (2003 Edition)

<http://www.va.gov/pubaff/fedben/Fedben.pdf>.

3. Copayments for Health Care

<http://www.va.gov/elig/page.cfm?pg=17>

<http://www.va.gov/Revenue/overview.cfm> (includes a chart on "Which Veterans Pay for Which Services at VA Healthcare Facilities".)

4. CARES (Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services)

<http://www.va.gov/cares/>

5. Military Record Locator

[http://www.archives.gov/research\\_room/obtain\\_copies/veterans\\_service\\_records.html](http://www.archives.gov/research_room/obtain_copies/veterans_service_records.html)

6. Health Benefits and Services – What do you qualify for?

[http://www.va.gov/health\\_benefits/page.cfm?pg=13](http://www.va.gov/health_benefits/page.cfm?pg=13)

7. Fact Sheets on Servicemember Employment Housing and Consumer Rights

[http://www.defenselink.mil/specials/Relief\\_Act\\_Revision/](http://www.defenselink.mil/specials/Relief_Act_Revision/)

<http://www.dol.gov/vets/whatsnew/uguide.pdf>