

November 11, 2008 - Murtha Op-Ed in Honor of Veterans Day

The following Op-Ed appearing in the Tribune-Democrat, Daily American, Valley Independent, and the Herald-Standard on November 11, 2008.

By Congressman John P. Murtha (PA-12)

Chairman, House Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense

November 11, 2008

Veterans Day is a time to honor those Americans who answered the call to service and who proudly fought to defend our freedoms. America owes an immeasurable debt to each of the 23.4 million veterans alive today, including the tens-of-thousands living right here in southwestern Pennsylvania.

Honoring our veterans means more than just words and speeches. For Congress, it means putting our money where our mouth is and fully funding the Veterans Administration. It means ensuring that our veterans have first-class health care and providing them with access to jobs and higher education.

For too long, the Veterans Administration was under-funded and unable to adequately meet the needs of our veterans. We've changed that over the past few years.

The Democratic Congress has made an unprecedented commitment to our nation's veterans by passing the largest spending increase in the 77-year history of the Veterans Administration. A record \$16 billion increase in just two years.

For the 5.8 million veterans in the VA health care system, this increase provides for the hiring of an additional 15,000 VA health care workers, including 1,700 new doctors and 6,450 nurses. This means better care, more services, and shorter wait times. The Veterans Administration will also hire over 5,200 new case workers to reduce the significant backlog in the VA claims processing system, which will help our veterans get their earned benefits faster.

For the first time since 1979, when gasoline cost less than \$1 per gallon, Congress increased the veterans' mileage reimbursement rate from 11 cents to 41.5 cents per gallon. Veterans in our area, who are forced to travel to Pittsburgh or Altoona for care, will now

be more fairly reimbursed for their travel.

Congress also provided significant research, treatment, and counseling funds for Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). It is estimated that over 300,000 of our returning troops will suffer from these mental health problems, and we provided over \$1.2 billion in just the past two years to take care of these injuries.

We have seen a dramatic increase in suicides in the wake of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Congress passed legislation directing the Veterans Administration to develop a comprehensive suicide prevention program which includes access to mental health staff and a 24-hour toll-free suicide prevention hotline. Already over 30,000 veterans, family members, and friends have used the hotline and it has helped to prevent over 1,200 suicides.

Also this year, Congress passed a new 21st Century GI Education Bill to benefit our service members who have served since September 11, 2001. The new GI Bill funds a full, four-year public university tuition, provides a monthly living expense, and allows service members to transfer unused educational benefits to their spouse and children. I was given the opportunity to attend college under the G.I. Bill, and I believe it is our responsibility to ensure that America's next generation of veterans receives the same higher educational benefits.

Over the past two years, the Democratic Congress has put its money where its mouth is. The new Congress and President Obama will continue to provide our veterans with the services and benefits worthy of their courage and sacrifice.

On this Veterans Day, let us remember the sacrifices of millions of Americans who answered our nation's call to service. While we can never fully repay the debt of gratitude we owe to the men and women who put on the uniform, we can and will work to fulfill our promise of taking care of each and every veteran. We owe them no less.