



Senator Maria Cantwell



Honoring Washington's Veterans

Dear Veteran,

November 11 marks the 50th anniversary of Veterans Day. This historic occasion is an important opportunity for all Americans to express our gratitude to our nation's veterans for the sacrifices you have made serving our country and defending our freedom. Although we commemorate your service on this special day each year, it's important to remember that the men and women in uniform make sacrifices to safeguard America every day.

The ongoing deployments in the Middle East are a reminder of these sacrifices. This year, I had the opportunity to visit U.S. troops stationed in Afghanistan and Iraq, and I was proud to join the families and neighbors who welcomed home the thousands of Washington sailors who served in the USS Abraham Lincoln carrier battle group. I supported the supplemental funding bill for Iraq and Afghanistan because we cannot put our fighting men and women on the battlefield without giving them the equipment and resources they need to do their jobs.

I am profoundly grateful for the service of America's military personnel and for the sacrifices you have made in protecting our country and our freedoms. We have an important responsibility to ensure that you and your families are provided the benefits and assistance that you have earned and so greatly deserve.

I would like to take this opportunity to update you on some legislative issues that I know you are concerned about. Please be assured that I will continue to work with my colleagues on behalf of the many veterans in the State of Washington. As always, I look forward to hearing your thoughts on these issues, and I hope you will continue to keep me apprised of your concerns.

Best wishes,

Maria Cantwell

Providing Concurrent Receipt

I am pleased to report that active negotiations are underway to finalize a compromise on concurrent receipt. If approved, this legislation will reform the current policy that unfairly merges two distinct programs and forces many disabled military retirees to forfeit a significant portion of their well-deserved retirement pay. I am hopeful that the conference version of the Department of Defense authorization bill will be finalized soon and then be sent to the President for his signature.

I have been a long supporter and co-sponsor of this legislation, which is very important to Washington state. Last fall, I released a report that found that full concurrent receipt would provide an additional \$135 million annually to an estimated 26,300 veterans in Washington state.

Under the proposed compromise, full concurrent receipt will be phased in over a ten-year period for disabled mili-

tary retirees, National Guard members, and Reservists who have at least 20 years of service and a service-connected disability rated at 50 percent or higher.

The pending legislation would also expand the Combat-Related Special Compensation (CRSC) program. It provides concurrent receipt to military retirees, National Guard and Reservists who have at least 20 years of service and either 1) are receiving disability compensation for which the retiree was awarded the Purple Heart and rated with a disability of at least ten percent; or 2) received a combat or operations-related disability and rated with a service-connected disability of at least ten percent or higher.

Although this compromise will be a positive accomplishment and a step in the right direction, it remains an insufficient remedy to the persisting inequity in our veterans' benefits system. I know that this is an important issue to you and I want to reiterate my commitment to working toward full concurrent receipt. I will continue to monitor the

situation, and I will post information on my web site as it becomes available.

Increasing VA Health Care Funding

As many of you know, I have long been a strong advocate for increasing funding for veterans' medical care. I have heard from many of you across our state about the problems you face under the current VA health care system, including delays in obtaining medical care and the long distances you must travel to obtain care. As you know, thousands of veterans in Washington state are on waiting lists in order to receive care at veterans' facilities. This is absolutely unacceptable. We should not treat our nation's heroes in this manner.

I co-sponsored a bipartisan amendment to increase funds for VA medical centers by \$1.3 billion nationwide. Approximately \$30 million of those funds would go to Washington state, which received \$496 million for VA medical care last year. Next year, Washington state is expected to receive approximately \$521 million for veterans' health care. The amendment would increase those funds to \$551 million, allowing the state to care for approximately 6,000 new veterans. I will continue to work with my colleagues to see that this funding is enacted without further delay.



Fighting for Washington's VA Facilities

In December 2002, Veterans Affairs Secretary Anthony Principi established the Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services (CARES) Commission. The goal of the Commission is to provide recommendations to the Secretary of the VA regarding allocation of capital assets to meet the demand for veterans' health care services over the next several decades.

As many of you know, there have been reports that the VA was considering closing three veterans' hospitals in our state: American Lake, Walla Walla, and Vancouver. I am pleased that the VA has decided not to close American Lake, but I remain concerned about the fate of the Walla Walla and Vancouver facilities and strongly object to closing these facilities.

I submitted testimony at field hearings in Walla Walla and Vancouver opposing these closures. In my testimony, I argued that we must guarantee that veterans continue to receive the high quality of care that they currently receive and to which they are entitled. We must ensure that there are enough medical providers to provide care to veterans wherever and whenever necessary. I encouraged the CARES Commission to work with the VA hospitals in our state, as well as the Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs and veterans' organizations, to ensure that these services are available.

I also asked Washington veterans to contact me with their experiences, concerns, and suggestions for changes to the VA hospital system. I received mail from hundreds

of Washington state veterans and included these letters with my testimony for the Commission's review. I also had an open letter on my web site to Secretary Principi opposing the hospital closures in our state. Thanks to your wonderful support, I sent this letter to Secretary Principi with more than 750 signatures.

I truly believe that it is veterans and their loved ones who are best able to articulate the need for these hospitals; your letters, e-mails and phone calls

confirmed this. I was moved by all of your stories, and I am very grateful that you took the time to share them with me.

I also cosponsored S. 1283, a bill that would prohibit the Secretary of the VA from moving forward with a CARES proposal unless the Secretary notifies and provides Congress with 60 days to look at the proposal. The CARES Commission is expected to give its final proposal to Secretary Principi at the end of the year. Please be assured that I will continue to make sure that the health care services are adequately protected.

Improving Notification for National Guard and Reserve

Many people in Washington state have family members serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, and military deployment and reserve policies have a large impact on our region. More than 4,000 National Guard troops and 2,000 Reserv-

ists from our state are currently alerted and deployed. In September, I met with families and employers of National Guard and Reserve troops to hear their thoughts on these deployments.

Recently, the Bush Administration changed how it defines “deployment” of men and women in these units. Previously, troops were considered to be deployed as soon as their units were activated; now, they aren’t considered to be deployed until they arrive at their overseas destination. The men and women who volunteer their service in the Guard and Reserve do so knowing that they may be called upon to make sacrifices for our country. But for troops and their families and employers, this change increases the hardship of long deployments, and is unfair because it changes the rules for troops who are already serving our country abroad.

To address this issue, I introduced a Fair Deployment amendment to restore the original policy, and to improve policies for notifying Guard and Reserve troops of changes to deployment policies or schedules. My amendment directs the Pentagon to use the standard practice for deployment announcements, mobilization reports and communications, and to start counting deployment at activation. The amendment does absolutely nothing to limit the ability of the Pentagon to mobilize and use our Guard and Reserve units, nor does it limit the length of time that they can be deployed. In addition, the provisions can be waived at any point in the case of dire, unexpected operational needs. The National Guard Association of the United States, the Reserve Officers Association, and the National Military Families Association all officially endorsed my amendment.

These are trying times for these men and women, their families, and employers, and they deserve better. I am pleased to tell you that a revised version of my amendment was included in the Iraq-Afghanistan supplemental appropriations bill, which the Senate passed on November 3 and the President signed into law on November 6. As a result, Guard and Reserve members, their families, and others will now receive improved notification of the expected period of mobilization.

Academy Nominations

One of my privileges as a U.S. Senator is to nominate qualified young people to the distinguished service academies. I believe that veterans have tremendous insight into the traits that are necessary to succeed at service academies. That’s why I will be working with veterans to recommend the most qualified applicants for nomination to the service academies. If you are interested in assisting me with this process, or know of a young person who

would like to apply to one of the academies, please contact Lee Lambert in my Seattle office at (206) 220-6400.

Services for Veterans

I regularly meet with members of the armed forces, veterans, and their families, and often hear about the problems they have navigating the federal bureaucracy to solve a question regarding their benefits or another issue. If you are having trouble receiving your compensation – or having a problem with any other federal agency – please contact my Seattle office at (206) 220-6400. I look forward to helping you. In the meantime, here are several unique online services that may be of interest to veterans, current service members, and their families. I hope you find this information informative and helpful.

- **Military records.** The National Personnel Records Center is working to make it easier for veterans with computers and Internet access to obtain copies of documents from their military files. Military veterans and



the next of kin of deceased former military members may now use a new online military personnel records system to request documents. To use the new web-based application, please visit <http://vetrecs.archives.gov/>. *Note: Other individuals with a need for documents must still complete the Standard Form 180, which can be downloaded from the web site.*

- **Operation Hero Miles.** In September, the military began rotating troops stationed in the Middle East back home for much-needed R&R time with their families. Service members can fly either to Baltimore or Germany for free, but they must pay their own way from there. However, through a new program called “Opera-

tion Hero Miles," three airlines – Alaska Airlines, Delta, and Southwest – are allowing their customers to donate their frequent flyer miles to help them get home for free. A number of corporate partners have volunteered to match mileage donations. Information about this great program can be found on the website <http://www.heromiles.org>.

- **Military consumer issues.** The Federal Trade Commission operates a web site, Military Sentinel, to keep military families apprised of consumer issues that specifically affect service members. You can visit the web site at <http://www.consumer.gov/military>.

Working for you

In September, I received a letter from John Soloman-chik, a veteran of both the Army and the Air Force who served our country during World War II and the Korean War, in addition to his twenty-five years of service in uniform during peacetime. While he was in the Air Force, John severely injured his knees, and as a result today uses a wheelchair. John had contacted the VA in July to inquire about buying a handicapped-accessible van, but more than two months later had received no response.

I contacted the Department of Veterans Affairs on his

behalf. Within a month, the VA told me that John had been approved for an automobile adaptive equipment grant. The VA paid \$9,000 toward the purchase price of his van, plus the cost of certain adaptive equipment.

Helping constituents is one of the most important and fulfilling parts of my work in the Senate. If you are a veteran and need help, or have a family member or friend who needs assistance, please let me know. I'll do everything I can to help you get results.



To contact me by U.S. Mail: 717 Hart Office Building / Washington, DC 20510
e-mail: <http://cantwell.senate.gov/contact/>
To get service help: <http://cantwell.senate.gov/services/>
To subscribe to my weekly email update: <http://gp1d.senate.gov/mailman/listinfo/cantwell-weekly-update>