



# Senator Maria Cantwell

## Celebrating Washington's Veterans

*Dear Friend,*

*As one year ends and another begins, it is a time to be thankful for the sacrifices made by men and women who have served our country and defended freedom in the armed services.*

*The events of the past year and a half are a reminder not only of the importance of our military strength, but also of honoring the commitments that our government makes to the veterans of this country.*

*On Veterans Day, I met with a group of veterans in Port Orchard to discuss issues like VA health care and concurrent receipt. As we all agreed, we must ensure that promises made are promises kept, and I look forward to continuing to work with veterans to deliver for those who have served.*

*I share your personal commitment to supporting our veterans. My father served in Europe during World War II, joining the Air Force even after my uncle was reported missing in action.*

*This newsletter is designed to update you on some of the key issues facing Washington state's veterans community. As always, I welcome your thoughts and ideas, and encourage you to write or e-mail me with your feedback.*

*Best wishes for a happy holiday,*

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Maria Cantwell". The signature is fluid and cursive.

*Maria Cantwell*

## Cost of Living Adjustments

As many veterans know all too well, for too long the benefits system did not adequately account for inflation. As a result, every year, the actual value of benefits for veterans decreased. This was unfair and needed to be changed.

On October 23, 2002 President Bush signed into law the Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2002 (H.R. 4085). This law will now ensure that disabled veterans and surviving spouses will receive the same cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) each year that is applicable to Social Security benefits. This COLA will be an increase of 1.4 percent and will become effective December 1, 2002. I strongly believe we need to ensure that veteran's benefits are not reduced by inflation, and that the annual COLA should track the actual inflation rate each year.



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## Concurrent Receipt

President Bush has signed compromise legislation to change current law that unjustly requires Department of Defense (DOD) retirees receiving disability compensation to deduct their disability payments from their retirement benefits. As veterans throughout the state recognize, this current limit to "concurrent receipt" unfairly merges two distinct programs and shortchanges thousands of veterans. What the President will sign is a small, but important, first step in the longer battle to restore the full concurrent receipt benefits for thousands of veterans in Washington state.

The compromise on this issue was struck by House and Senate negotiators following President Bush's threatened veto of Senate legislation that I supported, which would have restored full concurrent receipt to all disabled military retirees. The compromised legislation provides concurrent receipt to two veterans groups: 1) any retiree receiving disability compensation whose disability was combat-related and for which the retiree was awarded the Purple Heart; and 2) any retiree with a service-connected disability rated at 60 percent or higher incurred as a direct result of armed conflict, while engaged in hazardous service, in the performance of duty under conditions simulating war, or through an instrumentality of war.

Although this compromise between the House and Senate negotiators is a positive accomplishment, it remains an insufficient remedy to a persisting inequity in our veterans benefits system. This was an important first step in what will continue to be a long battle to provide concurrent receipt to all eligible veterans - a battle that I remain committed to fighting. I appreciate the support of veterans in the state for my efforts to push this legislation, and I look forward to continuing to work with you in the future to restore full concurrent receipt benefits.

## Funding

As we all know, the central issue plaguing our veteran's policy is a perpetual lack of funding. Whether it be in the benefits levels, health care quality, length of processing times, or anything else, we need to be willing to pay the price to fulfill our promises to the veterans community.

President Bush's fiscal year 2003 budget requested increasing the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) budget to \$56.6 billion, including \$22.7 billion for medical care. Although I applaud the President's commitment to increase the VA's budget, I do not think that this increase is sufficient to adequately meet the needs of our nation's veterans, including better services and shorter adjudication times for disability compensation claims. Indeed, the President's request for health care is \$1.724 billion lower than the health care recommendations of the Independent Budget.

I will be urging the President to increase his budget for VA next year. Along with several of my colleagues, I sent a letter to President Bush requesting that he raise VA health care funding to \$3.1 billion more than than appropriated for fiscal year 2002. I was also very disappointed that President Bush decided to not release the \$5.1 billion emergency spending package that included included \$275 million for the VA to reduce backlogs at VA medical centers.

## Veterans' Employment Training

I am a strong supporter of providing our veterans opportunities to get training and education to find employment outside the military. For this reason, I strongly supported the Jobs for Veterans Act (H.R. 4015), which passed the Senate on October 15, 2002 and was signed into law on November 7, 2002 by President Bush.

This legislation requires federal, state and local governments to work together to provide employment and training services for veterans and surviving spouses. The Jobs for Veterans Act requires any company that receives a contract with the United States worth \$100,000 or more to seek to employ and promote qualified veterans.

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## Terrorism Preparedness for DVA

At a time when we face terrorism and other threats to our homeland, we need to ensure that the infrastructure is in place to meet the needs of our veterans in the case of a major terrorist incident. For this reason, I supported the Department of Veterans Affairs Emergency Preparedness Research, Education, and Bio-Terrorism Prevention Act of 2002 (H.R. 3253), which passed the Senate on October 15, 2002 and was also signed by President Bush on November 7, 2002.

This legislation authorizes the VA to establish four National Medical Preparedness Centers to focus on ways to prevent and treat victims of biological, chemical, explosive and nuclear terrorist attacks.

## Improvement of VA Benefits

On November 18, 2002, the Senate unanimously passed the Veterans Benefits Improvement Act of 2002 (S. 2237). This is an omnibus piece of legislation that would improve a variety of veteran's benefits. This legislation would extend VA health care eligibility to surviving spouses who marry after the age of 55. In addition, this legislation would provide compensation for female veterans who have undergone mastectomies and expand benefits for veterans who lose their hearing. S. 2237 also expands mortgage assistance programs for veterans and increases the amount of the Medal of Honor special pension from \$600 to \$1,000 per month. The Veterans Benefits Improvement Act has been sent to the President for his signature.



## Academy Nominations

One of my jobs as U.S. Senator is to nominate 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. As such, I will be working with veterans to recommend the most qualified applicants for nomination to the service academies. If you are interested in assisting my office in this process, please contact Lee Lambert in my Seattle office at (888) -648-7328.

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## Veterans History Project

The veterans who served in our country's wars have incredible stories to tell that will help us and future generations understand the contributions – and sacrifices – they have made to preserve our freedom and way of life.

The Veterans History Project, administered by the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, is collecting oral histories, letters, diaries from veterans of World War I, World War II, and the Korean, Vietnam and Persian Gulf Wars. The Veterans History Project encourages participation from a wide range of veterans' organizations, military installations, civic groups, museums, libraries, historical societies, students and teachers, colleges and universities. Oral histories and documents collected through this project will be part of the national Veterans History Project Collection at the Library of Congress.

I believe this is a unique opportunity for all

individuals to become better educated about the sacrifices veterans have made. For information and updates on the project, go to the website at [www.loc.gov/veterans](http://www.loc.gov/veterans) or please call my Seattle office at (888) 648-7328. If you decide to participate in this project, please let my office know, as I would love to hear the stories of veterans in Washington state.

### A Final Note

I am profoundly grateful for the service of America's military personnel and for the sacrifices they have made to defend and preserve our great nation. As such, we have an important responsibility to ensure that military personnel and their families are provided benefits and assistance that they have earned and so greatly deserve. Please be assured that I will continue to work with my colleagues on behalf of the many veterans in the State of Washington.

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