



# Chairman Charlie Dent

*Subcommittee on Military Construction and Veterans Affairs  
House Committee on Appropriations*

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**Full Committee Markup – FY 2017 Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies  
Appropriations Bill  
April 13, 2016  
Opening Statement As Prepared**

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Thank you, Chairman Rogers, for the opportunity to bring this bill before the full Committee this morning. The Military Construction, Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies bill provides generously for our servicemembers, our veterans, their families, and our monuments and cemeteries. Chairman Rogers and Mrs. Lowey have been steadfast in their support and interest in this bill, and we appreciate their leadership on veterans and military issues, as well as an allocation of \$81.6 billion, almost \$1.8 billion over the fiscal year 2016 level, which allowed us to accomplish a tremendous amount.

I appreciate the participation of our Subcommittee members, both sides of the aisle, as we considered priorities and funding levels for the important programs in the bill. Our Subcommittee Ranking Member, Mr. Bishop, is a great partner in all the work of this subcommittee and in conducting meaningful oversight. Thank you, Sanford. And I'd like to pause and recognize a long-time member of this subcommittee, Sam Farr, who is leaving us to retire to the California coast. Sam has served on our subcommittee since 1999, making him the longest-serving member of the subcommittee. He has been responsible for some great ideas, fueled by creative thinking and elbow grease. One example is the Monterey model, which has become the benchmark in developing public-private partnerships between the military and the surrounding community to deal with base closures. Through it all, his dedication to our veterans and servicemen and women has been unwavering. Sam, thank you for your service--and we extend that thanks to your staff too—especially Debbie Merrill, who has worked Mil Con and VA issues since the beginning. We will be thinking of you on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July every year, which I understand is your birthday. Congratulations on your retirement.

Now to the main event. The funding recommendation before you totals \$81.6 billion, which includes: \$7.7 billion in military construction funds; \$172 million in Overseas Contingency Operations funds, as requested by the President; \$73.5 billion for the Department of Veterans Affairs; and \$241 million for the Related Agencies in our bill--the American Battle Monuments Commission, Arlington National Cemetery, the Armed Forces Retirement Home, and the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims.

We heard from many of you during this process. We took over 1,000 member requests into account as we wrote the bill and the accompanying report, and did our best to accommodate member interests and make responsible investments that serve our constituents.

For Military Construction: This bill supports our troops with the facilities and services necessary to maintain readiness and morale at bases here in the states and around the world, and provides for Defense Department schools and health clinics that take care of military families. Family Housing is funded at \$1.3 Billion, DOD schools at \$246 million, and hospital construction at \$304 million. We provide \$673 million for the Guard and Reserve for projects in 21 states. We increase the NATO Security Investment Program to \$178 million, which is a 32 percent increase, to deal with increasing threats and necessary

investments overseas. We include \$172 million in OCO funding, for European Reassurance Initiative and counter-terrorism projects.

Discretionary funding for Veterans programs in the bill is \$73.5 billion, which is \$2.1 billion, or 3 percent, above fiscal year 2016. This is the highest level of funding ever. VA Medical Care is funded at \$64.1 billion, a five percent increase over last year. That includes an \$850 million increase for medical care over the amount that was advance funded last year for for fiscal year 2017.

Many of you requested funding for various programs within VA, and I want to let you know that we fully funded the budget request for: Hepatitis C at \$1.5 billion; veteran homelessness at \$1.6 billion; long-term care at \$8.6 billion; caregiver stipends at \$725 million; and Office of the Inspector General at \$160 million.

We provide the full request for the Veterans Benefits Administration, which is a \$118 million increase over fiscal year 2016, and the full request for the Board of Veterans appeals, which is a \$46 million increase. Again, many members wanted to see these funding levels achieved.

We continue to focus on major construction oversight- the bill includes language that will hold back 100% of the funding for the largest construction projects until VA meets management conditions, and we maintain strict restrictions on transfers, use of bid savings, and scope changes.

The bill provides \$528 million for major construction projects in Reno, Nevada and Long Beach, California, as well as cemeteries in Florida, New York and Colorado.

We provide funding for the electronic health record and fully support interoperability of the health record between VA and DOD, but we fence all of the funds until VA meets milestones and certifies interoperability to meet statutory requirements.

We include language regarding improved standards for the Suicide Hotline and certification of mental health therapists to expand access for veterans who need their care.

This is a solid, bipartisan bill that is focused on the needs of servicemembers, veterans and their families. We had to balance priorities, and figure out “needs” versus “wants”, which is never easy, but is central to our duties as appropriators. No matter how much funding we provide, there are always those who say it is not enough. Given the budget analysis and oversight we conducted, I strongly disagree.

In total, the recommendation is \$1.7 billion over the fiscal year 2016 level; a 2.2 percent increase. The funding level for VA is the highest ever. Within the VA recommendation, Medical Care is funded at 5 percent over last year’s level, which itself was a record-breaker. In Military Construction, we have taken care of our military with funding for housing, schools, hospitals and operational mission needs.

I urge you to support the bill. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

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