



## **Chairman Charlie Dent**

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

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**FY 2018 Military Construction, Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill  
Subcommittee Markup  
June 12, 2017  
Opening Statement As Prepared**

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The Subcommittee will come to order.

Today, we consider fiscal year 2018 funding for the Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies bill. This is the first subcommittee markup of the season, and it is being held less than three weeks after Congress received the President's budget request. That is an amazing feat, and to accomplish it, we greatly appreciate the support that Chairman Frelinghuysen and Ranking Member Lowey have provided us. And thanks also to the members of the subcommittee, who have been active, engaged and integral to the process.

We have held five hearings, including a Member Day, a public witness hearing, and the Secretary of Veterans Affairs. In addition, we have gotten on the road. As a group, we spent March 14th at the VA Medical Center in Washington, D.C.; we have had military briefings from Pacific Command, European Command, and US Forces Korea and Japan; and in April we had a CODEL to visit our bases in Japan and South Korea. There is no substitute for seeing how much our work here matters to our veterans and our soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines and their families.

I want to also recognize the contributions of our new Ranking Member, Debbie Wasserman Schultz, who has been fully engaged in every aspect of the subcommittee's work. I'm not sure she enjoyed the helicopter tour of our bases in Okinawa, but other than that our work together has been positive and productive. She is particularly focused on suicide prevention at VA and asks great questions. Thanks for that work, Debbie. The hallmark of this subcommittee has been joining together to conduct complete and proper oversight in order to best serve veterans, servicemembers, and taxpayers. That commitment continues.

As part of the process, we have heard from many members about their priorities. We opened the member request database twice, in March and again in May, after the President's budget request was delivered. We received over 1,000 member requests and we put a lot of effort into looking at each one. We have accommodated the vast majority of the requests. I'm sure the Ranking Member would join me in saying that our staffs on both sides deserve thanks for their hard work and professionalism throughout this intense process.

Now, for the numbers. The bill contains \$88.8 billion in budget authority, reflecting increases in our defense titles and in the non-defense discretionary accounts that primarily fund veterans'

needs. The funding recommendation includes: \$10.2 billion in military construction funds; which includes \$638 million in Overseas Contingency Operations funds; \$78.6 billion for the Department of Veterans Affairs; and \$252 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.

This bill provides comprehensive support for servicemembers, military families, and veterans. It supports our troops with the facilities and services necessary to maintain readiness and morale at bases here in the states and around the world. It provides for Defense Department schools and health clinics that take care of military families.

And the bill funds our veteran healthcare systems to ensure that our promise to care for those who have sacrificed in defense of this great nation continues as those men and women return home. We owe this to our vets and are committed to sustained oversight so that programs deliver what they promise, and taxpayers are well served by the investments we make.

In Military Construction, the recommended funding level is \$10.2 billion, which is a 25 percent increase over the fiscal year 2017 level, and strongly reinforces the priorities in the President's budget request. The bill includes \$9.6 billion in base funding and \$638 million in Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) funding. The level is \$198 million under the request.

We included funding for the priorities of geographic Combatant Commands and new mission requirements – but we also supported military and family housing, training facilities, firing ranges, medical facilities, schools, and over \$600 million to support the needs of our special operations forces. It is extremely important that we get our infrastructure in shape to support the force we have now as well as the force we want to grow in the future.

In addition, the recommended funding level includes \$439 million to take care of the most critical projects on DOD's unfunded priorities list. These are worthy projects that did not make it into the budget request. For example, the recommendation includes Reserve and National Guard Readiness Centers, six small arms ranges, a flight simulator for F-35Cs, maintenance facilities and barracks.

The recommendation funds Family Housing at \$1.4 Billion, DOD schools at \$249 million, and hospital construction at \$737 million. We provide \$575 million for the requested Guard and Reserve projects in 22 states. NATO Security Investment Program is level funded at \$178 million to support infrastructure for wartime, deterrence, peace and crisis operations and training requirements. We include \$638 million in OCO funding, for European Reassurance Initiative and counter-terrorism projects. Included in the total is \$115 million to replace the barracks for our servicemembers who serve in Guantanamo. This project is long overdue.

VA is funded at 5.3 percent over last year's enacted level. Under the recommendation, VA will have \$78.6 billion available for fiscal year 2018, an increase of nearly \$4 billion over their FY 17 level. This is \$384 million under the requested level.

The bill funds VA medical care at \$69.0 billion in fiscal year 2018, including the full additional "second bite" request of \$2.65 billion, which is added to the advance funds already provided. VA medical care takes care of approximately 7 million patients. Within this total, funding includes: \$8.4 billion in mental health care services; \$186 million in suicide prevention activities; \$316

million for traumatic brain injury treatment; \$7.3 billion in homeless veterans treatment, services, housing, and job training; \$751 million for hepatitis C treatment; \$250 million in rural health initiatives; and \$50 million for opioid abuse prevention.

We funded several key programs above the budget request, in response to many member requests: \$2.8 billion for VBA/claims processing, which is \$50 million over the President's request, \$698 million for medical and prosthetic research, which is \$58 million over the request, and \$4.1 billion for information technology, which is \$80 million over the request.

The Secretary just made his announcement about the future of the Electronic Health Record last Monday. VA does not yet have an implementation plan, nor an estimate of the cost of the commercial contract. While we support the decision to have a single health record, and provide funding as requested, we fence 75 percent of the EHR funds in all relevant accounts until VA gets implementation plans in order. You will see great detail about the oversight plan in the bill language.

Oversight on major construction is rigorous -- we fence all funding for the largest construction projects until VA meets conditions, and we maintain strict restrictions on transfers, use of bid savings, and scope changes.

We continue language regarding improved standards for the Suicide Hotline.

We continue language to provide fertility treatment, including IVF, and adoption reimbursement to injured veterans and their spouses. The Administration requested the provision, which is included in the bill with a modification to cover costs for embryo cryopreservation and storage without a time limit.

The bill includes no language regarding VA's proposal for \$2.9 billion in additional mandatory funds for the Choice program or the associated cuts to mandatory programs to pay for it. That proposal is squarely in HVAC's jurisdiction.

In closing: This is a solid and fair bill that is focused on the needs of servicemembers, veterans and all their families. We had to balance priorities, and figure out "needs" versus "wants", which are tasks that are central to our duties as appropriators. We rescinded a total of \$589 million as part of our subcommittee mark.

In total, the recommendation is \$6.0 billion over the fiscal year 2017 level; a 7 percent increase. For the first time since I have become Chairman, we have a significant increase in Defense spending --25 percent. This funding is a wise investment and it is absolutely critical to have the military infrastructure in place to support readiness.

This bill supports veterans with the highest ever funding level for VA. VA medical care increased 7 percent over last year's level, as the demand for services and care from the 7 million patients continues to grow.

I urge you to support the bill.

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