

to increase veterans health care funding. We owe it to our veterans, who have so bravely served our country, to give them the best medical care possible. It is disappointing that funding for veterans programs, especially veterans health care, has not kept pace with either the increased number of veterans in the system or medical inflation. This amendment is crucial to providing veterans with the services they have earned.

As I have talked to veterans in California—and as I have met with returning soldiers from Iraq and Afghanistan—I have come to one disturbing conclusion: we are not serving all of the needs of our veterans now and we are not prepared to serve the tens of thousands of veterans who will be returning over the next couple of years.

Senator MURRAY's amendment begins to address this situation. It will increase veterans health care funding by almost \$2 billion. This includes \$610 million for new veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. Funding for these veterans is not included in the current VA budget. In addition, each of the 21 veterans regions will receive \$40 million to address their budget shortfalls. This will allow each region to determine how the funds can best be used to benefit their veteran population.

I am especially pleased that this amendment includes funding designated for veterans mental health care. Specifically, \$525 million is designated to expand mental health services, with \$150 million targeted for the treatment of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder—PTSD. The VA has estimated that 30 percent of men and women currently serving in the Armed Forces will need treatment for mental illness or readjustment issues. That is why this funding is so critical.

This amendment has the support of many veterans organizations, including the Veterans of Foreign Wars, AMVETS, Disabled American Veterans, and Paralyzed Veterans of America. They realize, as I do, how crucial it is that this funding be made available. Without it, the VA will not be able to meet the needs of the men and women who have so bravely served our country. I urge my colleagues to support this amendment.

Mrs. LINCOLN. Mr. President, today, I rise in support of an amendment to the emergency supplemental to provide an additional \$1.98 billion for veterans health care. I am a cosponsor of this amendment because I believe that when we talk about the costs of war, we cannot forget the brave men and women who are returning from war every single day.

In the past couple months, my home State of Arkansas has seen the return of over 3,000 brave men and women from the Army National Guard, who answered their Nation's call to serve in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Many of them will need ready access to health care as they attempt to transition back to the civilian lives they knew before the war.

I am troubled because they are returning to a veterans health care system that is underfunded and overburdened. Increasing health care costs and an influx of thousands of new veterans each month makes it essential that we do what we can to provide for veterans health care, and we do it now.

This amendment would enable the VA to absorb the new veterans being added to the system and would reverse many of the critical budget shortfalls that have left many VA facilities without the medical staff or equipment they desperately need. It would also provide \$40 million for every veterans regional network so they can better meet their local needs.

My father fought in Korea and I was raised from an early age to have tremendous respect for the unselfish service of the men and women of the Armed Services. As a United States Senator, I believe we have an obligation to provide them with the health care they were promised and to honor the benefits they have earned. I urge my colleagues to support this amendment because it is the right thing to do, it is our moral responsibility, and it should be a priority for each and every one of us.

Mr. JEFFORDS. Mr. President, the Bush administration has decided that all funding for the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan be requested as supplemental emergency funding. I believe, therefore, that we must include in this supplemental funding legislation, additional monies to cover the cost of the war incurred by the Veterans Administration.

The President's budget did not request sufficient funding to cover the significant increases in medical costs of veterans wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan. While severely wounded service members are remaining longer in the Department of Defense health care system than in past conflicts, the VA provides all care for these men and women after they are released from the military, and provides care to Guard members and Reservists beginning immediately after they return home from a deployment.

We must cover these expenses. We cannot turn away these veterans. We also cannot turn away other veterans and deny them care in deference to the newest veterans. That would not be right either.

I am pleased to join Senators MURRAY and AKAKA in offering this amendment to provide \$1.9 billion in additional funding to the Veterans Administration. Passage of this amendment would go a long way to covering existing shortfalls and allowing the VA to ramp up to meet the current and expected needs for the coming year. I am pleased that this amendment addresses the critical issue of mental health by providing \$525 million specifically for mental health care and treatment.

Unlike prior wars, where soldiers were expected to lay down their guns upon returning home and forget about

the war, service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan understand that it is very important for their mental health and the well-being of their family, that they deal with both the mental effects of the war and the emotional effects on their families of a long and stressful separation. Vet centers exist all across the country to help veterans and their families deal with the ghosts of war and manage the transition back home. These centers do a phenomenal job, but they are generally very small and have been handling a limited case load. With veterans returning from Iraq in huge numbers, particularly members of the National Guard and Reserve who do not live on or near military bases the job of the Vet centers has increased more than a hundred-fold. The Vet centers need an increase in both staff and resources commensurate with the demands now placed upon them.

We have learned from prior wars that much can be done to ease the transition back to civilian life if it is done immediately. Immediate mental health care can prevent the onset of more difficult diagnoses, such as post traumatic stress disorder. The VA has developed expertise in the diagnosis and treatment of PTSD, well beyond that of the private sector. The challenge now is to spread this expertise throughout the VA system. This takes resources. We also have learned that those soldiers who have suffered physical wounds will often need ongoing mental health assistance to face the challenges of life with a disability. We must not turn our backs on them.

The bill before the Senate is designed to cover the costs of these two conflicts. We cannot say we have done so if we do not cover the costs of the physical and emotional wounds from these conflicts. The only way that this can be done with the funding provided by the President's budget is if our obligations to other veterans are set aside. This would be wrong. The only way we can truly honor our obligations to all of our veterans is to support the amendment by the Senator from Washington, Mrs. MURRAY.

I urge my colleagues to support the Murray amendment.

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#### RECESS

Mr. COCHRAN. I ask unanimous consent we stand in recess under the previous order.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the hour of 12:30 having arrived, the Senate will stand in recess until 2:15 p.m.

Thereupon, the Senate, at 12:39 p.m., recessed until 2:15 p.m. and reassembled when called to order by the Presiding Officer (Mr. VOINOVICH).

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Mississippi.