

Kilker, who is retiring. She has served, of course, as the executive assistant for our Subcommittee on Benefits, has kept us all in line and has kept us all moving and kept us all in good humor. She knew when to make sure we got all our work done, and she rewarded us with chocolates, sometimes, or other benefits.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to again thank Ms. Kilker for her service. I have heard the words “dedicated” and “effective,” and I think that summarizes it. She has worked for veterans in the years that she has been with our committee. All the veterans of our Nation can join in thanking her for her effective service. I thank Beth Kilker.

Mr. SMITH of New Jersey. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Mr. Speaker, I want to join my colleagues, the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. EVANS) and the gentleman from California (Mr. FILNER), and really the entire committee on both sides of the aisle, in praising the long and distinguished service of Beth Kilker, Elizabeth Kilker.

Elizabeth Kilker has served with the committee for almost 25 years. I have been on the committee for 22 years, Mr. Speaker. I have known her. I have admired her. She is always a positive force. She has worked with chairmen and ranking members from Texas, Mississippi, Arizona, Arkansas, Illinois, and now New Jersey.

Throughout these years she has been extraordinarily helpful, effective, and always positive, perhaps something she learned at Immaculate Heart Academy in Girardville, Pennsylvania. But she certainly has brought a real sense of class, distinction and is, as I said, a very, very effective person.

The committee has not just been blessed, but the veterans themselves have been blessed. They have been enriched by her service, they will miss her, and may God bless everything that she does going forward.

Mr. UDALL of New Mexico. Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of the passage of H.R. 4085, the Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2002. I am proud to be a co-sponsor of this very important legislation.

Throughout the history of our great nation, the members of the U.S. Armed Forces have risen to the challenge of defending our democracy and freedom. However, in retirement and in periods of disability, these brave men, women, or their surviving spouses, frequently face a new challenge—the monthly struggle to make ends meet.

H.R. 4085 will help alleviate these monetary concerns through a cost of living increase in all veterans' benefits, and will provide a greater sense of financial security to spouses that survive the veteran into their older years.

I believe that we must continue to show our well-deserved respect and gratitude to the retired and disabled members of our military forces, and appropriately compensate them and their loved ones for their sacrifices. Accordingly, I would like to reiterate my support for the passage of this important bill.

Mr. REYES. Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of H.R. 4085, the Veterans' and Survivors' Benefits Expansion Act of 2002, of which I am an original cosponsor. This bill increases the rates, through a cost-of-living adjustment (COLA), of veterans' disability compensation for dependants, the clothing allowance for certain disabled adult children, and dependency and indemnity compensation (DIC) for surviving spouses and children. This bill would rightly allow veterans and survivors to receive the same percentage increase in benefits as are paid to Social Security beneficiaries.

I would like to thank the distinguished Chairman of our Committee, Mr. CHRISTOPHER SMITH, as well as the distinguished Ranking Member, Mr. LANE EVANS, for their hard work in bringing this bill to the floor.

Mr. Speaker, I would also like to take this opportunity to recognize the service of Ms. Beth Kilker. Beth has been a hardworking member of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee staff for over 20 years. I would like to wish her the best on her retirement and congratulate her for all of her outstanding contributions to the Committee.

Mr. GILMAN. Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate our colleague the distinguished chairman of our Veterans Committee, the gentleman from New Jersey Representative SMITH on H.R. 4085 and the outstanding work he has done in our Veterans Committee. This bill provides a cost-of-living adjustment to the rates of disability compensation for veterans with service-connected disabilities and to the rates of dependency and indemnity compensation for survivors of certain service-connected disabled veterans. The percentage amount will be equal to the increase for benefits provided under the Social Security Act, which is calculated based upon changes in the Consumer Price Index.

The Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall increase the dollar amounts in effect for the payment of disability compensation and dependency and indemnity compensation by the Secretary.

This bill allows additional compensation for dependents, clothing allowance, new Disability Indemnity and Compensation (DIC) rates for surviving spouses with minor children, additional DIC for disability and for dependent children.

The Secretary is required to adjust administratively, consistent with the increases made, the rates of disability compensation payable to persons who are not in receipt of compensation payable pursuant to chapter 11.

Our Veterans Committee is commended for recognizing this need for benefits for our veterans and I urge its adoption.

Mr. EVANS. Mr. Speaker, I have no further requests for time, and I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. SMITH of New Jersey. Mr. Speaker, I yield back the balance of my time.

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. CALVERT). The question is on the motion offered by the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. SMITH) that the House suspend the rules and concur in the Senate amendments to the bill, H.R. 4085.

The question was taken; and (two-thirds having voted in favor thereof) the rules were suspended and the Senate amendments were concurred in.

A motion to reconsider was laid on the table.

AMENDING TITLE 38, UNITED STATES CODE, TO INCREASE AMOUNTS AVAILABLE TO STATE APPROVING AGENCIES TO ASCERTAIN QUALIFICATIONS OF EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Mr. SMITH of New Jersey. Mr. Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and pass the bill (H.R. 3731) to amend title 38, United States Code, to increase amounts available to State approving agencies to ascertain the qualifications of educational institutions for furnishing courses of education to veterans and eligible persons under the Montgomery GI Bill and under other programs of education administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs, as amended.

The Clerk read as follows:

H.R. 3731

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

SECTION 1. INCREASE IN AGGREGATE ANNUAL AMOUNT AVAILABLE FOR STATE APPROVING AGENCIES FOR ADMINISTRATIVE EXPENSES FOR FISCAL YEAR 2003.

(a) IN GENERAL.—Section 3674(a)(4) of title 38, United States Code, is amended by inserting before the period at the end of the first sentence the following: “, and for fiscal year 2003, \$14,000,000”.

(b) EFFECTIVE DATE.—The amendment made by subsection (a) shall take effect on October 1, 2002.

SEC. 2. FEE FOR LOAN ASSUMPTION.

(a) IN GENERAL.—(1) For the period described in paragraph (2), the Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall apply section 3729(b)(2)(I) of title 38, United States Code, by substituting “1.00” for “0.50” each place it appears.

(2) The period referred to in paragraph (1) is the period that begins on the date of the enactment of this Act and ends on September 30, 2003.

(b) TECHNICAL AMENDMENT.—(1) Section 3703(e)(2)(A) of such title is amended by striking “3729(b)” and inserting “3729(b)(2)(I)”.

(2) The amendment made by paragraph (1) shall take effect as if included in the enactment of section 402 of the Veterans Benefits and Health Care Improvement Act of 2000 (Public Law 106-419, 114 Stat. 1861).

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the rule, the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. SMITH) and the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. EVANS) each will control 20 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. SMITH).

Mr. SMITH of New Jersey. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Mr. Speaker, as chairman of the committee, I rise in strong support of H.R. 3731, as amended, which would increase funding for State approving agencies from \$13 million to \$14 million for fiscal year 2003.

Since World War II, Mr. Speaker, Congress has relied on the SAAs to ensure the quality of education and training offered to our Nation's veterans

and to protect the integrity of VA education programs. These are the agencies that determine which schools, courses, and training programs qualify as eligible for veterans seeking to use their GI Bill benefits.

SAA's also provide a vital role in occupational licensing and credentialing for veterans and in employer outreach.

On May 21 of this year, Mr. Speaker, the House passed H.R. 4085, as amended, a bill that included an increase from \$14 million available to State approving agencies in fiscal year 2002 to \$18 million for fiscal years 2003, 2004, and 2005. The Senate passed a similar measure as part of S. 2237 on September 26, but the bodies have not yet reached final agreement to a compromise on the larger bill containing this provision.

Without this legislation, Mr. Speaker, the SAA funding would decrease from the current funding level of \$14 million to the \$13 million levels on October 1 of this year. This is a stopgap measure for fiscal year 2003 only. My proposal simply puts SAA annual funding back at last year's level of \$14 million for fiscal year 2003 in order to provide the SAA's with the resources necessary to fulfill their responsibilities.

Mr. Speaker, I join the ranking member, the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. EVANS), in urging every Member of the House to support this stopgap bill while we work on the other legislation.

I thank my good friend, the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. EVANS), for his cooperation on this legislation. We have throughout this session worked together on so many bills, and this is another one, while we work out some details with the Senate, hopefully to significantly boost the amount of money for the State-approving agencies.

Mr. Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. EVANS. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Mr. Speaker, I rise in strong support of H.R. 3731. I again want to thank the gentleman from New Jersey (Chairman Smith) and the leaders of our subcommittee, the gentleman from Idaho (Mr. SIMPSON) and the gentleman from Texas (Mr. REYES), for their effective leadership on this important issue.

As an original cosponsor, I urge all Members to support this bill. The purpose of this legislation is straightforward. It provides that the funding authorized for the State approving agencies for fiscal year 2003 is not less than the amount provided in fiscal year 2002.

Mr. Speaker, the State approving agencies play a vitally important role in the administering of educational benefits under the GI Bill. These are benefits our veterans and service members have earned. We must respect that. If Congress fails to move this legislation, SAA funding will be reduced. This would be harmful to veterans' educations.

Congress has recently added responsibilities and duties to the State ap-

proving agencies at a time when State budgets are being drastically cut. Congress must make sure that these agencies have adequate resources to do their job.

Mr. Speaker, I support the passage of this legislation, and I urge Members to do the same.

Mr. REYES. Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of H.R. 3731, a bill of which I am an original cosponsor, to maintain funding levels for State Approving Agencies who approve the Department of Veterans Affairs' educational programs as well as conduct outreach concerning education benefits. The passage of this bill will prevent a \$1 million decrease in funding for this program in Fiscal Year 2003. This decrease would likely result in the loss of State jobs and the degradation of this important program. We have a responsibility to our veterans to provide the services promised to them when they committed to serve our country.

Mr. Speaker, as you know, I have dedicated my service in Congress to improving the quality of life of our Nation's veterans. I remain committed to the responsibilities I have to our veterans.

I would like to thank the distinguished Chairman of our Committee, Mr. SMITH, as well as the distinguished Ranking Member and friend, Mr. LANE EVANS, for their hard work in bringing this bill to the floor.

Mr. UDALL of New Mexico. Mr. Speaker, I rise today in strong support of H.R. 3731, to increase funding for State Approving Agencies (SSA's). I am a cosponsor of this important legislation and I urge my colleagues to support its passage.

SAA's promote and safeguard quality education and training programs for all veterans and for other eligible persons. They protect the GI Bill resources available for those programs, programs proving beneficial to veterans in a wide variety of ways. They assure greater educational opportunities and more opportunities to meet the changing needs of our veterans.

The need to increase funding for SAA's primarily reflects the new SAA duties in occupational licensing and credentialing and veteran, servicemember and employer outreach in each State. In recent years, Congress has increased SAA responsibilities, most recently through enactment of P.L. 107-103, the Veterans Education and Benefits Expansion Act of 2001. This landmark legislation increased the basic GI Bill benefit by 19 percent in January 2002 and will further increase the benefit by 30 percent in October 2003 and 39 percent in October 2004.

However, SAA funding was capped at \$13 million without an annual increase from FY95 to FY2000. Congress did increase SAA funding to \$14 million, but only for FY01 and 02. If Congress does not act to increase funding for FY03, the SAA budget reverts back to the \$13 million level, which, when combined with the growth in workload for SAA's under new laws, leaves the SAA's lacking the necessary resources to fulfill their responsibilities. H.R. 3731 in-

creases SAA annual funding from \$14 million to \$18 million, with a three percent increase the following two years. Furthermore, under H.R. 3731, New Mexico's funding levels for SAA's is estimated to rise to a level of \$147,612, an increase of \$5,677.

If action is not taken on this bill, funding for this program will decrease by one million dollars nationwide, which will result in a loss of jobs nationwide. If we do not act, veterans will lose important services. Therefore I urge my colleagues to vote yes on H.R. 3731. You will be supporting veterans' educational rights; service members who will be returning to civilian life ready to contribute to this great nation.

Mr. EVANS. Mr. Speaker, I have no further requests for time, and I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. SMITH of New Jersey. Mr. Speaker, I have no further requests for time, and I yield back the balance of my time.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The question is on the motion offered by the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. SMITH) that the House suspend the rules and pass the bill, H.R. 3731, as amended.

The question was taken; and (two-thirds having voted in favor thereof) the rules were suspended and the bill, as amended, was passed.

The title of the bill was amended so as to read: "To amend title 38, United States Code, to increase amounts available to State approving agencies to ascertain the qualifications of educational institutions for furnishing courses of education to veterans and eligible persons under the Montgomery GI Bill and under other programs of education administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes."

A motion to reconsider was laid on the table.

RECOGNIZING EXPLOITS OF OFFICERS AND CREW OF THE S.S. HENRY BACON SUNK ON FEBRUARY 23, 1945

Mr. MCHUGH. Mr. Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and agree to the concurrent resolution (H. Con. Res. 411) recognizing the exploits of the officers and crew of the S.S. Henry Bacon, a United States Liberty Ship that was sunk on February 23, 1945, in the waning days of World War II, as amended.

The Clerk read as follows:

H. CON. RES. 411

Whereas during World War II the United States Liberty ship S.S. HENRY BACON was assigned the task of conveying war materials and supplies to the beleaguered Russian nation via the dangerous Arctic Ocean passage (referred to as the Murmansk Run) from Iceland or Scotland to Murmansk in northern Russia, and faithfully fulfilled her mission;

Whereas in early 1945 the British navy, having rescued a number of Norwegian civilians from occupied Norway and transported them to Murmansk, distributed them among the HENRY BACON and certain other merchant ships for transportation to England,